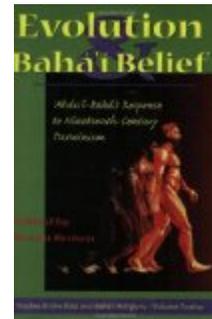


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Keven Brown, ed. *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to Nineteenth-Century Darwinism*. Los Angeles: Kalimót Press, 2001. xxiii + 278 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-890688-08-0.

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The harmony of science and religion is a key teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, one that speaks very much to the modern world. It tells us that the means whereby we understand God's material creation goes hand-in-hand with the understanding of his spiritual realms. Each complements the other, each is weakened if it seeks to stand on its own.

In few areas is this harmony more needed than in the study of evolution, where it sometimes looks as though the forces of godless materialism that seek to reduce man to the level of just another species, and an accidentally developed one at that, are arrayed against those of reactionary religious groups that seek to dismiss scientific progress and retire to a comfortable centuries-old shell and pretend things are the way they were in some mythical golden age of belief.

The idea of evolution did not begin with Charles Darwin and his *Origin of Species*. Theories had already been developed to account for the obvious changes the earth had undergone through time and the appearance and disappearance of species. What Darwin did was develop a theory that seemed to address all the aspects of biological evolution in a consistent and convincing way. It is not surprising that his views were widely taken up within a short time of their publication. What we now call neo-Darwinism, the development of his ideas in light of further research and study and our understanding of advances in fields like genetics, is probably supported by more (and more diverse) scientific evidence than any other theory in the history of science. It seems perverse to try to challenge it.

There are many references to the idea of change and evolution, of development, even of the variation of phys-

ical forms with time, scattered throughout the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Despite this, when Bahá'ís want to see "what the Faith says" on the subject they almost invariably turn to the relevant sections of *Some Answered Questions* and come away with the view that "the Faith is against evolution."

A large section in *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief* examines what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said there and shows how the translation needs to be set in the context of other things he said and of many other things in the Writings. It deals with the question of "What is a species?" which is at the root of whether the Master was denying evolutionary change, and comes to the conclusion that the word is used in several senses, not merely in the biological way we tend to assume, or even the common Western philosophical alternative, and that the background and references of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá is saying have to be taken into account. When this is done, a more complex and nuanced picture emerges which permits physical change and development to the form of humankind while not denying its spiritual uniqueness or its special status as the goal of the evolutionary process.

'Abdu'l-Bahá parts company very firmly with Darwin's nineteenth-century proponents (and to a lesser extent with Darwin himself) and with modern scientific explainers of evolution such as Dawkins and Gould on a key point. Although Darwin himself had begun to study for the clergy before devoting himself full-time to scientific research, he did lose his religious faith, as a result not so much of his researches as of the death at a young age of his beloved daughter. However, he did not make this an issue in his writing. Others were quicker to say that Darwin had dethroned God and made him redun-

dant. All was to be explained by a struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. Man was not the pinnacle, the “fruit of the tree of the world” as the Bahá’í concept has it. He was just the accidental outcome of many chance events, just another animal species. This view was promoted by some of the “Western philosophers” whose views ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejected. It still underpins much evolutionary thinking today and often draws forth an equally extreme fundamentalist religious reaction.

The other aspect of evolutionist thinking that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejected is linked with this (although to their credit, modern evolutionary writers such as Gould reject it). If God and his teachings have no place and we are just animals, the result of a struggle for existence, there is a natural tendency for that attitude to spill over into other fields. “Survival of the fittest” became a feature of industrial and social life, of international relations (where it was much loved by generals in strong countries who saw it as a sort of general permission to make war on weaker neighbors), of legislation itself. This perversion of Darwinian thinking has marred much of the century-and-a-half since *The Origin of Species* was published.

I suggest that *Evolution and Bahá’í Belief* is essential reading for any Bahá’í who wishes to study the subject properly or to comment on it. It is not a complete treatment and indeed admits its own limitation in that regard. Originally planned to contain three sections—one by an historian dealing with the philosophical background and the sort of terms ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was using and the nature of the arguments he used, one by a physical scientist discussing the evolutionary process in principle and in practice and its relation to Bahá’í teachings, and one by an evolutionary biologist—it lacks the last one, which was not available by the time of publication. This is most unfortunate. The book would also have benefitted from having the second section (more general and more readable) placed before the first.

The definitive treatment of the Bahá’í teachings on evolution and their reconciliation with scientific knowledge has yet to be written, but this book goes a good way towards it.

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