

**THE ORIGINS OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY OF CANADA, 1898-1948****Author:** Will C. van den Hoonaard**Published by:** Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Canada, 1996, xii+ 356 pages, including index

Professor Will C. van den Hoonaard, a sociologist at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, has written an impressive, interesting, and meticulously researched book. *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada* is, in fact, a work in progress, which could be said to have begun over ten years ago with a series of journal articles, chapters in books, and conference papers, and which will continue with more publications. (See page 334 of the book's bibliography.)

The book successfully studies how a non-Western religious movement transplants itself to a foreign, Western culture. The author's approach is distinctive in the field of religious studies because he uses both a historical and sociological approach, which together provide the reader with a relatively complete analytical understanding of how and why the Bahá'í Faith established itself in Canada. The first chapter of the book is primarily methodological. It positions the author in the field of sociology of religion and explains how he uses an approach to scholarship which feminists have pioneered in academia, namely, he makes those being studied his partners and gives the research back to them for their input and critiquing before the actual publication. Chapters two and three describe the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to Canada and the first Canadians to convert to this religion, whether resident in the United States or Canada. Chapter four attempts to analyze 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Québec. The fifth through ninth chapters explain how the Bahá'í Faith was established in the different parts of Canada. The author places a special emphasis on the importance of youth, women, and ethnic minorities (especially Jews) in the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith across Canada. Chapter ten analyzes how the Canadian Bahá'ís developed into a more cohesive community. Chapters eleven through thirteen discuss the means of community growth and those who were involved in this growth. Chapter fourteen outlines opposition to the new religion and the impact of World War II on its development in Canada. Chapters fifteen and sixteen conclude the work with an analytical summary of the author's findings, including an explanation of how an Eastern religion could permanently establish itself in Canada. One of the book's strengths is the author's ability to bring out the eminent ordinariness of the early Canadian Bahá'ís and how a typical population cross-section of any town could accomplish something so extraordinary. The prime importance of this book is it shows that in order to understand how a foreign religion can implant itself in a new environment, multiple paradigms for different periods in time are needed.

The whole concept of the book began with a fortuitous discovery of a 1917 letter (written by a Saint John, New Brunswick, Bahá'í), which stimulated the author's interest in researching the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada. The research was hampered by the fact that the early Canadian Bahá'ís did not feel it necessary to save important primary source material. Written for both scholars and Canadian Bahá'ís, this book is an important effort, for scholarly research rightfully belongs to the community from which it is taken. The author has also participated in an exciting collaboration between scholar and the medium of television to bring the fruits of his research to the public at large. Vision TV, a television channel run by a consortium of Canadian religious organizations dedicated to the dissemination of programs fostering religious, spiritual, and moral values, has filmed a documentary about *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898–1948*.

One critique of this book is that the author does not seem to have served scholars as fully as the Bahá'í community. The author uses theological terms without explaining them. As little Bahá'í theology has been published, there can be no agreed understanding of the meaning of certain basic terms, such as "steadfastness" or the religious implications of "the Greatest Name" (17). No sociological analysis was made of the early Bahá'ís' perception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Jesus Christ (22). Terms such as "teaching," "pioneering," and "covenant" are used without an adequate explanation of their meaning for the Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Shoghi Effendi's role of interpretation is not discussed. "Hand of the Cause of God" is used on page 28, but only explained on page 117. An appendix would have sufficed to deal with most of these issues. This minor complaint—that there was not enough information on the religious aspects of the Bahá'í community—has been echoed by two sociologists of religion, Karel Dobbelaere of Belgium and Margit Warburg of Denmark (at the 1997 International Conference of the Society for the Sociology of Religion). Among the editorial problems are a few wordprocessing troubles that led to grammatical errors, missing punctuation, missing and incorrect bibliographic entries, and some problems with the endnotes.

Chapter four, which deals with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Montreal, is an excellent example of the difficulties in studying the Bahá'í community. The author has produced an interesting narrative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's stay and its impact on the local media, but, despite the primordial importance of the tour for Bahá'ís, scholars have surprisingly little to go on if they wish to study this period of Canadian Bahá'í history. Professor van den Hoonard first had to uncover basic facts regarding this visit, most of them unknown to the modern Bahá'í community, including the actual dates of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sojourn. Unfortunately, for most of the visit, no information at all has yet been discovered, and most of what has been found is contradictory. This book has

laid a strong foundation for future researchers, who, one hopes, will be able to uncover more information about how the Bahá'ís experienced this visit. Perhaps, in light of the paucity of information available, the author's assertions concerning the impact of this trip might have been less emphatic.

The author's research has produced a theory, that of "religious singleness," which merits further investigation by scholars. Religious singleness refers to individuals who belong to a religion different from that of their family members, colleagues, and associates. This means that while the religion, to have any meaning for its members, will have a distinct value system, its borders are flexible so that the individual can still have ties other than to the religion. This theory is used to explain how the Bahá'ís spread their religion. The author feels that religious singleness is "particularly relevant today as the international context of new movements becomes more important than their localized expressions of community" (277). It is hoped that the author's theory and work receive the attention they deserve in the academic world.

LONI BRAMSON-LERCHE