

Research Note

Bertrand Russell's links with the Bábí-Bahá'í religions: a research note

Seena Fazel and Payvand Agahi

Abstract

This research note documents Bertrand Russell's limited connections with the Bábí-Bahá'í religions. Drawing on a recently discovered letter from Russell to a British Bahá'í and other archival sources, we outline Russell's interest in the Bábí-Bahá'í religions and his likely attendance at a single public meeting in London where he heard Abdu'l-Baha. These links confirm Russell's engagement with a wider intellectual culture, including new religious and spiritual movements.

There are relatively few recorded accounts of philosophers meeting Bahá'í leaders and engaging with Bahá'í thought. Some prominent Bahá'ís during the time of Bahá'u'lláh were themselves trained philosophers, particularly Áqá Muḥammad-i-Qá'íní (also known as Nabíl-i-Akbar) and Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání.¹ In the early 20th century, Leo Tolstoy expressed admiration for Bahá'í teachings toward the end of his life,² and Alain Locke, philosopher and central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, identified himself as a Bahá'í from 1918 onward, drawing on Bahá'í principles in his work on multiculturalism.³

A previously undocumented connection between Bertrand Russell, the eminent British philosopher, logician, and public intellectual, and the Bahá'í Faith has come to light through a recently discovered letter he wrote to Elizabeth Albrow⁴ (1929-2022). This letter, from November 1956, was written when Russell was 84 years old. At the time, Albrow was investigating the Bahá'í Faith and had attended her first public meeting at the Bahá'í Centre at Rutland Gate, London, a few months earlier in May 1956.⁵ According to her daughter, Catherine Bennett Ryan, Albrow admired Russell's humanist outlook and body of work, though she had no prior personal links or

¹ In the modern period, Ali-Murad Davudi was a professor of philosophy at Tehran University, until his disappearance in 1979. He authored several works on the history of Greek and Islamic philosophy, and on Bahá'í themes.

² William P. Collins and Jan T. Jasion, 'Lev Tolstoi and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths: A Bibliography', *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 3.3 (1991), <https://journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/article/view/58/52> [accessed 1 March 2026].

³ There is a passing mention of the Bahá'í religion by the Catholic philosopher Paul Tillich, who incorrectly describes it as a "synthetic religion" (*My Search for Absolutes*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1967).

⁴ Payvand Agahi discovered this letter by chance in *Prayer: A Bahá'í Approach* by William Hellaby and Madeline Hellaby, donated to the local Bahá'í library in Sheffield. See also Albrow's brief autobiographical note available <https://histories.bahai.org.uk/2013/05/03/liz-albrow/> [accessed 1 March 2026].

⁵ Albrow describes attending her first public Bahá'í meeting at the London Bahá'í Centre (Rutland Gate) in May 1956. <https://histories.bahai.org.uk/2013/05/03/liz-albrow/> [accessed 1 March 2026].

correspondence with him. She describes that her mother was keen to correspond with individuals she admired about the Bahá'í Faith, thus it is unsurprising that she would contact Russell in this regard.⁶ Albrow began her letter by writing, “I have been plucking up courage to write to you for a long while” and went on to compliment Russell on his recent book *Portraits from Memory*,⁷ adding that she had read six or seven of his books and had “great admiration” for him. She continues by asking him whether he had heard of the Bahá'í Faith, which advocates for “many of the things you write about as being good and desirable for mankind”.⁸ Albrow enclosed a booklet, likely to be the 1954 publication *The Bahá'í Faith*,⁹ a 16-page introductory pamphlet outlining ‘Some basic Bahá'í principles’, including:

The oneness of mankind
The oneness of religion
The independent investigation of truth
A world commonwealth
World peace
The relinquishing of prejudices
A universal auxiliary language
Equal status for men and women
The harmony of religion and science
Education for all mankind
Certain general economic principles.

In his response, Russell wrote: “Thank you for your very nice letter of November 1. I have been interested in the Bahai Faith for a great many years and I once heard the Bahai Ullah [sic] offer up a prayer. My interest in the movement was due to my friend Browne, who wrote books about Persia, of which he was an enthusiastic admirer. Yours sincerely, Bertrand Russell [signed]”¹⁰ (see Figure 1 for copy of original).

Russell appears to be referring to hearing a prayer read by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá during one of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s two visits to London. During that time, Russell lived in a flat in Bloomsbury and was in his late 30s. The likely location for this encounter was ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s public talk for the Women’s Freedom League on 2 January 1913, where it is reported that more than a thousand people

⁶ Interview with Catherine Bennett Ryan and Payvand Agahi, 27 August 2025. Bennett Ryan noted that her mother keeping a copy of his reply in one of her books suggests it was important and meaningful to her.

⁷ A collection of essays published in 1956, including autobiographical talks and personal recollections of notable contemporaries, including John Maynard Keynes, John Stuart Mill, and H.G. Wells.

⁸ The letter ends with the following: “Have you heard of a movement called the Baha’i Faith? It began in Persia round about 1824 [sic]. I have recently come into contact with some London Baha’is and was struck by the fact that they advocate and hope for many of the things you write about as being good and desirable for mankind. I wondered if you had heard of them, and in case you hadn’t, decided to write to you and tell you about them. I enclose a booklet which sets out very briefly some of their principles, in the hope that you will find some interest in it.” (letter dated 1 November 1956 in Russell archives, Albrow_BR_21232).

⁹ *The Bahá'í Faith* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954).

¹⁰ A handwritten copy is held in the Russell archives and was likely used for the typed version (Russell archives, BR_Albrow_15148).

attended. Given Russell was an active and public supporter of women's suffrage, it is plausible that he attended. The account of this talk includes a prayer recited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the end, which focused on women's equality and rights.¹¹

Russell's letter also referred to his friendship with Edward Granville Browne, the Cambridge historian and prominent scholar of Persia, who met Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and several early Bábís and Bahá'ís, and who also wrote early accounts of the Bábís.¹² The BRACERS archive at McMaster University identifies eight letters from Browne to Russell, and two from Russell to Browne, including one on Browne's 1918 work, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*. This book was in Russell's library.¹³ In an undated letter, Russell thanked Browne "most warmly for your kind gift of your book on Babism. I have read the beginning with intense interest..."¹⁴ Other letters from Browne are not related to the Bábí-Bahá'í religions, for example stating that he would be attending the Persian legation in London, and a list of several books on Persian mysticism that Browne offered to send to Russell if he was interested.

These brief encounters did not lead to any engagement with Bahá'í thought in Russell's works. Whether the Bahá'í Faith continues to interest philosophers will partly depend on the availability of literatures that are academically informed and draw on the latest scholarship in the field. This research note adds to scholarship on Russell's encounters with a wide intellectual milieu, including new religious movements and recent Persian history.

¹¹ Sohrab, *'Abdul-Bahá's Second Visit to the United Kingdom*, 5 December 1912–21 January 1913, p. 225, see https://bahai-library.com/sohrab_merrick_abdul-baha_britain [accessed 1 March 2026]. The prayer at the end of this talk is recorded as:

"O Thou Almighty, confirm the members of this Society; assist these souls present to arise and serve the world of humanity, to proclaim the oneness of the world of women, that they may become free from past prejudices and behold the countenance of God. O God, confer marvellous progress upon this Society; cause it to advance in all the virtues of humanity; illumine the hearts of all with the rays of Thy Kingdom; quicken their spirits with the breath of Thy Holy Spirit, and bestow the life of God. Give us Thy blessing so that men and women may have equal freedom; may they attain to equal rights so that even male and female may be entirely forgotten. May all unitedly and solemnly serve Thee and obtain the blessings of God. Give us Thy bounty, O Lord, so that all humanity, men and women, characterised by the image of God, may attain the supreme knowledge of Thee, discover the foundation of all holiness, live and act in accordance with Divine teaching, unitedly and with one accord, their hearts cemented and spirits joyous till they see the world of heaven!"

¹² There is little information about Russell's friendship with Browne, who does not feature in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1914-1944* (Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1968). An archival source refers to four letters from Browne to Russell from 1917-1921, in which Russell states "'Persian Browne', as he was called, wrote some delightful books on Persia". See McMaster University Archives, Feinberg RA1 Catalogue, p. 141, see https://www.mcmaster.ca/russdocs/Feinberg_RA1_Catalogue.pdf [accessed 1 March 2026].

¹³ No. 250. The introduction of the book includes this statement, which may have resonated with Russell: "The political ideals of the Baha'is have undergone considerable evolution since their propaganda achieved such success in America, where they have come into more or less close connection with various international, pacifist and feminist movements. These tendencies were, however, implicit in Baha'u'llah's teachings at a much earlier date, as shown by the recommendation of a universal language and script in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, the exaltation of humanitarianism over patriotism, the insistence on the brotherhood of all believers, irrespective of race or colour..."

¹⁴ The letter continues "and shall read it through as soon as I can, but at the moment, as you may imagine, I have not much leisure" (E. G. Browne papers, Box 11, bundle 9, item 31). Another letter from Russell to Browne describes Russell's impression after a visit to China.

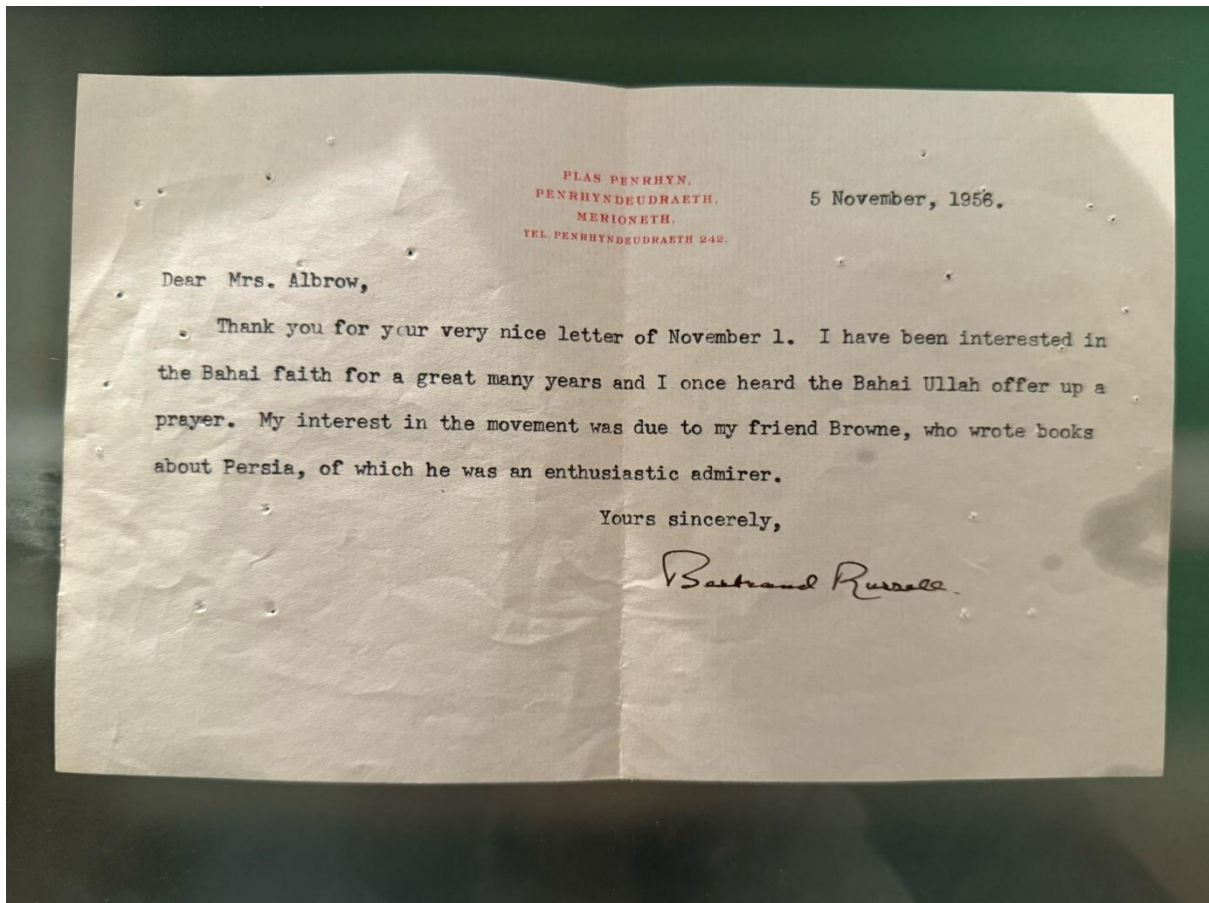
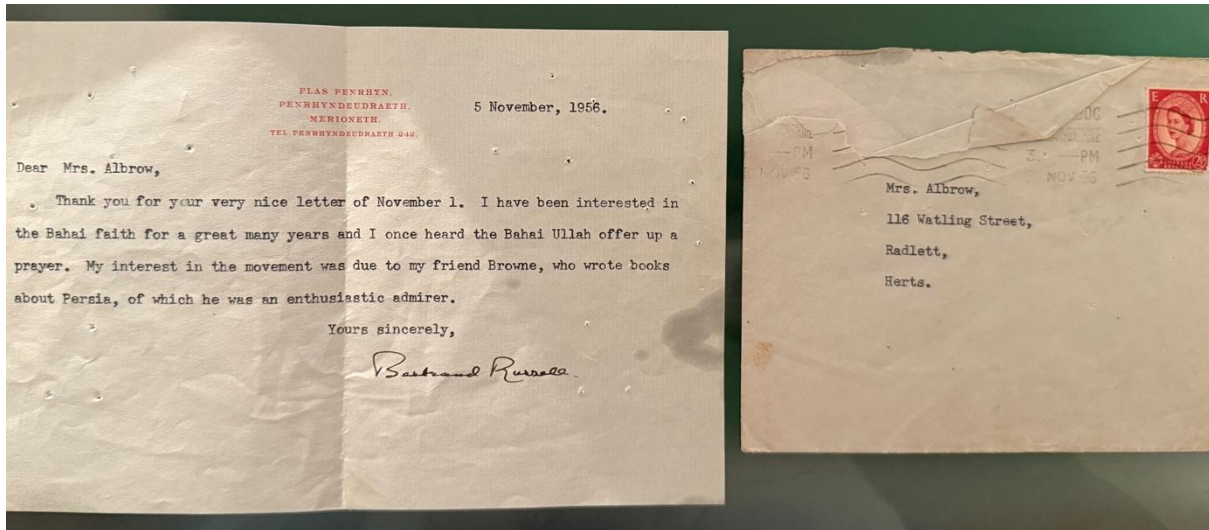


Figure 1. Copy of Russell's letter to Elizabeth Albrow (Source: Authors)

Acknowledgements

We thank the Russell Archives at McMaster University for providing copies of correspondence between Albrow and Russell, and Browne and Russell. We are also grateful to Carmel Momen for her assistance in locating and scanning introductory Bahá'í booklets from the 1950s in the Afnan Library archives.

Author biographies

Seena Fazel is professor of forensic psychiatry at the University of Oxford. He edited the Bahá'í Studies Review from 1990-2002, and is co-author of *The Bahá'í Faith in Words and Images* (Oneworld Publications).

Payvand Agahi has recently completed a PhD in psychology and religion at the University of Oxford.