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## **The 'Celtic' Dimension of Pre-First World War Religious Discourse in Britain: Wellesley Tudor Pole and the Glastonbury Phenomenon**

**ABSTRACT:** This article will explore the contribution made to the construction of discourse around religion outside of mainstream Christianity, at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain, by a Celticist movement as represented by Wellesley Tudor Pole (d.1968) and his connection to the Glastonbury phenomenon. I will detail the interconnectedness of individuals and movements occupying this discursive space and their interest in efforts to verify the authenticity of an artefact which Tudor Pole claimed was once in the possession of Jesus. Engagement with Tudor Pole's quest to prove the provenance of the artefact, and his contention that a pre-Christian culture had existed in Ireland which had extended itself to Glastonbury and Iona creating the foundation for an authentic Western mystical tradition, is presented as one facet of a broader, contemporary discourse on alternative ideas and philosophies. In conclusion, I will juxtapose Tudor Pole's fascination with Celtic origins and the approach of leading figures in the 'Celtic Revival' in Ireland, suggesting intersections and alterity in the construction of their worldview. The paper forms part of a chapter in a thesis under-preparation which examines the construction of discourse on religion outside of mainstream Christianity at the turn of the twentieth century, and in particular the role played by visiting religious reformers from Asia. The aim is to recover the (mostly forgotten) history of these engagements.

**KEYWORDS:** *Celticism, Glastonbury, Au delà, Bricoleur*

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## *Introduction*

During the early years of the twentieth century in Britain, an easy mobility existed across organisations and ideas, whether liberal Christian positions or congregations, esoteric or spiritualist interests, 'Eastern' oriented philosophies such as Theosophy, social causes as in the suffragist movement and groups directly associated with visiting religious reformers from Asia.<sup>1</sup> A unique insight into how this phenomenon manifested itself can be found in a gathering convened in the Deans Yard home of the Anglican Archdeacon, Albert Basil Wilberforce (d.1916), Canon of Westminster Abbey and Chaplain of the House of Commons, with over forty high status individuals representing various strands of religious interest in attendance. The Deans Yard assemblage and its deliberations can be conceived as a prism, where various elements of interest concerning religion outside of mainstream Christianity converged with the conjunction of a number of those leading the way in forging that discourse, even if the specific topic under consideration was emblematic of but one specific facet of that discussion. Using this gathering as a reference point, in this article I aim to uncover the particular contribution made to this developing discourse by a 'Celtic' network, as represented by Wellesley Tudor Pole and his championing of Glastonbury as a 'sacred' landscape, primarily through the instrumentality of a vessel found there that he claimed dated from the time of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

'Celticism' is understood here as explained by Leerssen, 'not a study of the Celts and their history, but rather the study of their reputation and the meanings and connotations ascribed to the term 'Celtic'' (Bowman 2012, 329). Tudor Pole was inspired by the idea that a pre-Christian culture had existed in Ireland which had extended itself to Glastonbury and Iona, and which was the repository of an authentic Western mystical tradition, the true roots of spiritual life in the West (Benham 1993, 12). Still, his pursuits also blended identification with the 'mystic East', with interest in Hermetecism, Theosophy and Spiritualism. In some respects, Tudor Pole's pursuits mirror the activities of those promoting the 'Celtic Revival' in Ireland during this period, though a distinct alterity in their worldview is acknowledged. Through examination of (mainly) published materials concerned with the individuals and movements under consideration, I hope to underscore the rich and varied nature of an evolving discourse around esoteric and alternative movements and philosophies, contributed to by many outstanding individuals, which has received little attention in European religious historiography.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Thomas has written about the nineteenth century East/West encounter, the 'movement of knowledge rather than of people', where the 'East' was specifically India (Thomas 1988, 72-96). In my larger study I have concentrated on actual visits to Britain of religious reformers from Asia, in particular those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (d.1921), head of the Bahá'í religion, between 1911 and 1913. Many of those mentioned in this paper were involved in his reception in Britain.

<sup>2</sup> 'Network' is here employed in a broad sense to denote connection and communication both formal and informal. In her study, Abdo uses the concept to specifically identify those Celticists who had an interest in Bahá'í (Abdo 2003, pp.96-104).

*The 'Curious'*<sup>3</sup>

Those journeying outside of mainstream Christianity at this time were interconnected and known to each other. Amongst them can be counted the Anglican Archdeacon, Albert Basil Wilberforce (d.1916), Canon of Westminster Abbey, Rector of St. John the Evangelist, Smith Square in London, and Chaplain of the House of Commons (Woods 1917 & Abdo 2003). Wilberforce was the son of a bishop and grandson of William Wilberforce (d.1833), the abolitionist. He was appointed to his positions of prominence by the Prime Minister, William Gladstone (d.1896) who, in the notice of appointment, asked only that Wilberforce not use the pulpit at Westminster to further the campaign he was then waging for total abstinence from alcohol (Abdo 2003, 57 & Woods 1917, 96-97). The Archdeacon combined his establishment duties with an interest in a variety of ideas and activities concerning religion, including the occult and spiritual healing, and he was closely associated with leading Theosophists. He had lectured on the relationship of 'Eastern' religions to Christianity and Russell (one of his biographers) recounts, somewhat acerbically, that '[h]e communed with "Spooks" and "Swamis" and "Controls"' (Russell 1918, 120).<sup>4</sup> Amongst his varied interests and leanings, Wilberforce was an admirer of Swami Vivekananda and connected to the Swami's activities in London in 1895 and 1896 (Burke 1983, 275-278 and 1984, 165). He was centrally involved in 'Abdu'l Bahá's visit to London in 1911 and welcomed him to speak at his church, St. John's, in Westminster (Balyuzi 1971, 145-149). Along with H.R. Haweis (d. 1901), who had been at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago as an 'unofficial' Anglican delegate, he was amongst the most popular Anglican preachers of his era. Haweis' church was very well attended but he was less accepted by the establishment than Wilberforce (Burke 1985, 275-282).<sup>5</sup>

Wilberforce was the spiritual mentor to many of the guests he invited to a special gathering convened at his Deans Yard home, in the shadow of Westminster Abbey, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1907. Amongst over forty high profile establishment personalities, the group included the well-known Congregationalist Minister, R.J. Campbell (d.1956),<sup>6</sup> the poet and educationalist,

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<sup>3</sup> One of the early pioneers of anthropology, Andrew Lang, considered (writing in 1901) that, although English philosophers and scholars had focussed on the origins of religion for a period of circa thirty years, there was still 'no general excitement' and little public interest in this debate which had been left to the 'curious' and 'the learned' (Lang 1901, 6-7). In an earlier chapter of my study I have explored the efforts of scholars of 'comparative' religion to fashion an intellectual space for a discussion about religions in the world. A review of the Christian religious milieu at this time in Britain can be found in, Helmstader 1990 and Larsen 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See, also, Benham 1993, 67-70.

<sup>5</sup> See, also, Haweis 1894.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell was rector of the City Temple in London and one of the most well-known pastors of his generation. He was the main proponent of a Protestant reform movement, the 'New Theology', before suffering a breakdown and resiling from avant-garde and alternative positions he had adopted and retiring to a quietest life as an Anglican Minister (See, Smith 1968 & Campbell 1907). He met 'Abdu'l Bahá on a number of

Alice Buckton (d.1944),<sup>7</sup> noted scientist, Sir William Crookes (d.1919),<sup>8</sup> and Viscount Halifax (d. 1934), a leading campaigner for the corporate reunion of the Church of England with Rome.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the soiree was to examine the claims made for a glass, sapphire blue bowl found in Glastonbury in 1906, that became known as the Glastonbury Vessel or Cup and which Wilberforce considered could be the Holy Grail.<sup>10</sup> Its owner (or keeper), Wellesley Tudor Pole (d.1968), then just twenty three years old, simply contended that it was at one time in the possession of Jesus. He claimed that it was a unique object which had particular implications for the Glastonbury area in which it was found and the role this and other sacred landscapes would play in the revival of an authentic, indigenous Christianity (Fenge 2010, 16-43).<sup>11</sup>

In unveiling the find to his distinguished audience, Tudor Pole was making the argument that the vessel presented possibilities for the articulation of a new religious framework, one which was uniquely Christian in its orientation and authentically western in origin and centred on Glastonbury, even if (as we shall see) the influence of Asian religious thought on his worldview was not insignificant.<sup>12</sup> In the course of the discussion, Tudor Pole was questioned closely about all aspects of the curio and those present showed a clear interest without any indication of scepticism being recorded in the transactions of the meeting, in common with the reactions of other notables who had viewed or would later inspect the artefact, figures such as Annie Besant, the President of the Theosophical Society, and the famed expert on the occult, A.E. Waite. The scientists present, it was noted, were generally impressed, advised further investigation and Wilberforce felt confirmed in his view that the vessel was indeed the Holy Grail (Benham 1993, 68-76 & Fenge 2010, 23). He was not, though, unmindful of how this eclectic gathering and its purpose might appear to his superiors and in his opening remarks had pronounced the proceedings

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occasions and invited him to address the City Temple congregation in London in September, 1911 (Balyuzi 1971, 144-145).

<sup>7</sup> Alice Buckton, along with Wellesley Tudor Pole, was a significant figure in the Celticist movement. She was the author a celebrated nativity play 'Eager Heart' which enjoyed much success around this time. Both she and Tudor Pole entertained close links with 'Abdu'l Bahá during his sojourn in Britain and thereafter. (See, Cutting 2004, Benham 1993, Fortune 2000, Bowman 2000 & Bowman 2012). For a review of Buckton's Froebelian credentials, see Mathivet 2006, 263-281. See also, Abdo 2003, 98-101 and Balyuzi 1971, 213 & 347-348.

<sup>8</sup> Crookes was the discoverer of the element, thallium, and cathode rays (Hall 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Lindley Wood, second Viscount Halifax, father of Edward Wood the future Foreign Secretary and Viceroy of India. Viscount Halifax was an avid collector of ghost stories, collections of which were published by his son, Edward. See Cobb 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Grail legends concern a vessel used by Jesus (or used to collect some of his blood) and connect Celtic myth, Arthurian lore, Britain and Jesus. See, Loomis 1991.

<sup>11</sup> For more detail of Tudor Pole's background and activities see, Gaythorpe 1979, 35-40, Benham 1993, 65-83, and Weinberg 2012, 49.

<sup>12</sup> That 'oriental' and western ideas have combined to affect western Christian trends leading to the emergence of the New Age movement has been discussed by Hanegraaff 2007, 45. There has been no study focussing on Buckton and Tudor Pole's role as harbingers of New Age thinking and their importance in this regard. Their independent efforts preserved important Glastonbury properties for posterity. See, Cutting 2004 & Chalice Well Trust 2009.

‘strictly private, not for publication’ (Fenge 1993, 18). In what in modern terms would be described as a ‘leak’, the entire story made its way onto the pages of the *Daily Express* newspaper of July 26<sup>th</sup> 1907 (the front page), with headlines that included, ‘Mystery of a Relic’, ‘Finder Believes it to be The Holy Grail’ and ‘Great Scientists Puzzled’. The opening lines of the article, which was remarkably detailed, read,

A small circle of eminent leaders of religious thought, antiquaries and scientists are at present discussing with the deepest interest, the discovery in remarkable circumstances of a glass vessel of beautiful workmanship and supposed great antiquity, in a spot near Glastonbury Abbey. (Benham 1993, 35 & Fenge 2010, 76-77.)

More revealing and interesting, in the context of locating this episode and its actors in the evolution of religious discourse, is the commentary contained elsewhere in the same edition of the newspaper which illustrates the general milieu in which this discussion was taking place.

The astounding story, told at length in another column, of the finding of an alleged ‘holy relic’ at Glastonbury Abbey has a particular value in showing again the immense and widespread interest felt in things supernatural and mystic... A Bristol gentleman [Tudor Pole] discovers a mysterious vessel in Glastonbury. Twenty years ago he would have been merely laughed out. Today, eminent men, among them divines and scientists, solemnly meet to discuss his story and to discover what the vessel may be... [I]t does seem to us both interesting and admirable that the finding of an alleged ‘holy relic’ should stir the interest of a body of eminent men of widely differing opinions and culture. (Benham 1993, 77-78.)

The attendees did not welcome the public attention the breaking of the story attracted, especially as there followed a media stir with national and regional periodicals following it up and seeking out the individuals who had been present. A second gathering, the following January, specifically convened to pronounce on the age of the artefact, ended inconclusively, though there was a general consensus that the vessel was of modern vintage. Wilberforce may have regretted his initial enthusiasm for the vessel and there is some evidence that his central involvement in the matter ‘led to some complications’ (Benham 1993, 82) with his superiors. If so, and if claims for the vessel and its significance receded (at least from public scrutiny),<sup>13</sup> Wilberforce continued to be active in other investigations with respect to religion and spirituality, Russell averring that ‘Wilberforce was always a good deal swayed by what was in the air’. If his views were ‘changeable and eclectic’, he combined serious interest in the occult, the suffragist movement, Celticism and ‘Eastern’ religions, while he ‘never lost hold of the central facts of Christianity’. (Russell 1918, 68). His response to the Victorian religious ferment was to valorise the free movement of the ‘spirit’, whilst always keeping that traditional Christianity was a *pleroma*. He proved to be an influential figure in acting as a link between a variety of disparate groups and individuals journeying outside of mainstream Christianity while still maintaining his traditional position and role in British society.

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<sup>13</sup> Publicity around claims for the vessel did not entirely abate. See, Benham 1993 & Fenge 2010 for the complete story.

In fact, many of those involved in the Deans Yard consultations were closely connected to a broader discourse outside a purely 'Western' spirituality or esotericism that welcomed interaction with religious reformers from Asia. The gathering comprised a loose affiliation of high profile personalities across religion and the sciences, some of whom were actively investigating multifarious claims and ideas outside of the mainstream.<sup>14</sup> These were high status individuals and, by and large, it was the intelligentsia which was predominantly engaged in these activities.<sup>15</sup> The affiliations of those in attendance at Deans Yard in July 1907 present a tapestry of interconnections, the individual threads of which comprised many of the contemporary movements or philosophies then popular. Focus on some of those involved in the encounter just described may serve to clarify how these representatives of the 'curious' contributed to the construction of a response to the crisis of doubt concerning religion at this time, of which the Glastonbury vessel is but one representation and their relationship to visiting religious reformers from Asia, yet another. The purpose of the gathering was, ostensibly, to 'substantiate the psychically derived story' (Benham 1993, 65) of the origin of the vessel. For its finder, it may have presented an opportunity, his passport 'to a fuller rapport with the larger world establishment' (Benham 1993, 65). Beyond that, we can conceive the Deans Yard assemblage and its deliberations as a prism, where various elements of the discourse on religion outside of mainstream Christianity converged.

### *Tudor Pole's Quest*

How the cup had come to be in Glastonbury and was eventually found by Tudor Pole is a long story of dreams and intimations on his part, and that of his family and friends who were joined with him in the find. Briefly told, Tudor Pole, who was a medium with inclinations towards Theosophy and psychical research, became interested in Glastonbury as a spiritual centre, by his own account, in the year 1902 and later came to believe that '[T]here was a wonderful find to come to light at Glastonbury- a find that would link the founder of the Christian faith with modern leaders of Christian thought' (Fenge 2010, 19).<sup>16</sup> His interest tweaked, Tudor Pole made frequent pilgrimages to the area, as much as possible around St. Bride's Day (Feb.1<sup>st</sup>), and, following a visionary experience, guided a

<sup>14</sup> Abdo's analysis of different networks, the individuals they comprised and their association with 'Abdu'l Bahá is instructive in this regard (Abdo 2003, 84-121). Accounts of 'Abdu'l Bahá's visits to Britain include mention of a number of these leading individuals and their various affiliations.

<sup>15</sup> As well as those mentioned earlier, Fenge counts amongst those present; the American Ambassador, Whitelaw Reid, The Dean of Westminster, Armitage Robinson, Canon Duckworth, senior political figures, artists, and an assortment of Dukes and Lady's. He also notes that Mark Twain (Samual Clemens) had previously had a private viewing of the vessel at the Wilberforce residence (Fenge 2010, 17-19). An account of this episode is contained in, Bigelow 1911, 1387-1388. Benham records that antiquarians and experts in antiquarian artefacts were in attendance (Benham 1993, 75).

<sup>16</sup> In later life, Tudor Pole was known by his initials, W.T.P., following in the style of Madame Blavatsky (H.P.B.), one of the founders of Theosophy (Lehman 1968, 13). On Blavatsky see, Campbell 1980.

‘triad of maidens’ (his sister and two friends) to the discovery of the vessel in St. Bride’s well at Glastonbury in the autumn of 1906. It soon came to light that the vessel had been placed there previously by a certain Dr J.A. Goodchild, a medical doctor, mystic and Celticist, who purchased the cup in Bordighera, Italy, in 1887. The bowl was presented to Goodchild’s father who pronounced it a sacred object and it remained for some time in his safe keeping. In 1897, Goodchild had a vision during which (he later recounted), he was directed following the death of his father to take the cup and place it in the Women’s Quarter at Glastonbury, a task he duly accomplished in the year 1897. Goodchild and Tudor Pole were adamant that there was no collusion in the independent recovery of the vessel in 1906, though Tudor Pole did doubt the veracity of how Goodchild came by the cup and endeavoured to trace its provenance, without success (Benham 1993, 7-50 & Fenge 2010, 23-31).<sup>17</sup> Tudor Pole and Goodchild had indeed been in contact with each other on a number of occasions prior to the find and had ‘discussed Christian origins connected with Glastonbury’ (Gaythorpe 1979, 37). A more recent account goes so far as to speculate that the placing and finding of the vessel was done on dates of significance corresponding to elements of the Golden Dawn tarot design based on constellations of the zodiac (Abdo 2003, 101). In any event, it is clear that Goodchild and Tudor Pole were well versed in the meanings and motifs they were endeavouring to articulate through the agency of the vessel, and the significance of the particular location where it was found in St Bride’s well.<sup>18</sup>

The Glastonbury Cup was placed in a specially designated room in the Tudor Pole household in Bristol, white curtains draping the walls and an altar type table with candles reserved as the resting place for the artefact. Various referred to as an ‘oratory’ or a ‘chapel’, both signifying a place dedicated to prayer, the location became an object of curiosity and veneration, a focal point for ‘mystical services, open only to women, combining Christianity and Celtic rites’ (Weinberg 2012, 49). For two years after the Deans Yard convocation, the oratory in Bristol attracted a wide variety of seekers, including Wilberforce, Buckton, Campbell and Goodchild. Though the Celtic associations with the vessel, and its significance as a sacred bibelot connecting modern Britain to the time of Jesus, were the primary focus of its veneration, other meanings were imbricated during this period. The ‘Jesus Cup’ (as it was sometimes referred to) having come from

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<sup>17</sup> The cup, apparently, has been examined many times since the Dean Yards gathering, including extensively by William Crookes. No clear verdict as to the exact age of the vessel has been pronounced, though estimates from various examinations down through the years vary from five centuries before the common era to the 1800’s (Gaythorpe 1979, 38-46).

<sup>18</sup> Bride is a form of Brigid or Bridget, variously described as a pagan Celtic Goddess or a Celtic Christian saint. The Irish St. Bridget (d.523) established a Christian settlement in Kildare around the year 480 where she was Abbess of a monastery for men whilst also taking charge of a second monastery for women. As an historical figure, it may be that Bridget of Kildare became conflated with an earlier deity and perhaps, also, with saints of the same name from Wales and Sweden. She reputedly came to Glastonbury in 488. A church was raised in her name which was supposed to have at one time housed relics of the saint and a nearby spring became known as Bride’s well, the water known for its power of healing and fertility. Apart from the Joseph of Arimathea myth and Arthurian apoloques, Glastonbury has a long association with Celtic mythology through St Bride (Bowman 2012, 388-399).



the Holy Land, its mission began to be represented as being for 'universal' good, 'both the keepers of the Cup and many visitors declared its purpose was to make a bridge between East and West' (Benham 1993, 112). In 1910, visitors from India made the journey to Bristol and left expressing the hope that the vessel would become the instrument for creating a new mystical awareness shared by people of various beliefs.<sup>19</sup> For his part, Tudor Pole (almost immediately after the gathering) set out on a quest that would periodically occupy his energies for the rest of his life. Having consulted one clairvoyant and received a letter (unsolicited) from another, Tudor Pole became obsessed with the idea that secret, ancient manuscripts existed that would prove the provenance of the cup. The psychic communications pointed to a cache of documents hidden in the grounds of the Seraglio Palace in Constantinople. The existence of long hidden, secret texts (repositories of ancient wisdom), was part of Hermetic lore, including that Constantinople was one of the possible sites where such treasures could be unearthed.<sup>20</sup> Tudor Pole made a number of attempts over many years to recover manuscripts but all proved unsuccessful (Benham 1993, 85-87 & Fenge 2010, 36-53).<sup>21</sup>

The quest did not preclude Tudor Pole from pursuing his Celticist leanings in yet other directions, inspired by Goodchild's idea that a pre-Christian culture had existed in Ireland which had extended itself to Glastonbury and Iona. In Tudor Pole's overarching religious framework, his antidote to his era's crisis of doubt, Glastonbury was to be the centre for a Christian renewal, the locus for a revival, a 'second coming' in the very place Christianity 'first touched Britain' (Fenge 2010, 31). The Cup would find its home in Glastonbury which would become a centre for physical and spiritual healing to rival the Catholic pilgrimage site at Lourdes. At the Deans Yard assemblage, he outlined his vision of the Christian Churches in Britain joining to become a harmonious channel for the Holy Spirit to bring about this regeneration. If that unity could not be achieved, he warned, then other agencies would be found and the Churches would have lost their opportunity, the most stupendous 'since the days of our Lord, for carrying on the evolution of the world' (Fenge 2010, 32), and the privilege would pass to another country. Glastonbury was to be the epicentre of the renewal, though still but one of three points of supreme spiritual importance across Britain and Ireland.

Over the next few years, Tudor Pole pursued plans to reawaken what he considered the three great spiritual centres of Britain and Ireland, Glastonbury (sometimes referred to as 'Avalon' after the island of Arthurian legend), the Scottish island of Iona and 'the Western Isle', an as yet unidentified island

<sup>19</sup> These comments are attributed to Professor L.T. Vaswani and Rev. Promotho Sen, both leading members of the Brahmo Samaj movement who visited in September of that year. Sen, at this time a Fellowship scholar at Manchester College, Oxford, was the nephew of Keshub Chunder Sen (d. 1884), a celebrated leader of the movement who visited Britain in 1870 (Abdo 2003, 112 & Moozomdar 1931).

<sup>20</sup> On the attempts by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Hermeticist monk, Leonardo da Pistoia, to search out manuscripts in various cities see, Salaman, Van Oyen, Wharton, and Mahé 2000, 9. Another treatment of the efflorescence of interest in Hermeticism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century can be found in, Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Tudor Pole had some hair-raising experiences during his quest journeys, particularly in Constantinople.

somewhere in Ireland. These three locations were regarded as the ‘heart’ of the expected spiritual renaissance; the capital cities of London, Edinburgh and Dublin ‘were as a triangle of the “brain” of their respective nations’ (Benham 1993, 103). The effort involved pilgrimages at Glastonbury and Iona (visits to Ireland would come later), the vessel being taken to all those spots considered sacred and prayers offered.<sup>22</sup> Outside of messages received *au delà*,<sup>23</sup> it is difficult to overlook Goodchild’s influence on Pole’s prosecution of his various avocations. Goodchild’s Celticism was influenced by his connection to William Sharpe (d. 1905), who wrote popular novels about the Celtic past under the pseudonym of Fiona McLeod. Sharpe, along with Goodchild and Tudor Pole (at one time or other), maintained links with central figures in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a brotherhood initiated in 1888 by a group of Rosicrucian Freemasons centred on theurgy, magic and esoteric thought. Simultaneous with his quest, Tudor Pole developed a relationship with Neville Meakin (d. 1912), a leading figure in one of the ‘Temples’ or sub-groups of the Golden Dawn, the Stella Matutina Temple. Meakin was also Grand Master of the Order of the Table Round, claiming to be the fortieth descendant of King Arthur. Tudor Pole became Meakin’s novice, moving through various grades of the Order with definite hopes of one day replacing him as Grand Master, only to be foiled on the eve of initiation to the highest grade on Meakin’s sudden, untimely death. Tudor Pole’s ambitions were thwarted when other leading figures in the Order closed ranks and froze him out (Benham 1993, 102-105).<sup>24</sup>

### *The Celtic Revival*

It may expose a fuller understanding of Tudor Pole’s fascination with Celtic origins if we briefly juxtapose his avidities with the approach of leading figures of the Irish ‘Celtic Revival’, which, at that time, represented a recrudescence of Celticism in Ireland. Their conceptual framework was bounded (according to Joseph Lennon and much like Tudor Pole’s) by ‘a narrative-grounded mysticism’ (Lennon 2004, 212), heavily influenced by antiquarianism, origin legends and Theosophy. In the case of Irish writers, such as W.B. Yeats (d. 1939), A.E. (George Russell, d. 1935), James Stephens (d. 1950) and James Cousins (d. 1956), these ‘Celtic imaginings’ (Lennon 2004, 214) set Irish culture on the road to cultural-decolonization. In the main, these figures emerged from a Protestant milieu, grappling with their own particular crisis of doubt while heavily influenced by Indian philosophy and Theosophy. In their case, interest in Celtic origins and the ‘mystic East’ has been characterised as a response to estrangement and political isolation felt by Anglicans in an increasingly Catholicised Irish society. But these inclinations have also been seen as a response to Protestant evangelicalism in the remoulding of ‘a millennium-old Irish narrative’ (Lennon 2004, xxxi), based on migration legends to Ireland from

<sup>22</sup> Tudor Pole’s influence on later developments at Iona is catalogued in Bowman 2000, 109. He later identified ‘the Western isle’, sometimes referred to as ‘the Holy Isle of the West’, as Devenish Island in Loch Erne, Co. Fermanagh, but not until 1930 (Fenge 2010, 170-176.)

<sup>23</sup> Meaning, ‘the beyond’, a term used by Tudor Pole in his own writings to describe the realm from where messages came to him (Gaythorpe 1979, 209).

<sup>24</sup> For a history of the Golden Dawn see, Howe 1972.

the 'Orient', to assert a unique and ancient Irish culture and spirituality. That both influences are credible establishes an interesting correspondence to Tudor Pole and his fellow seekers (engaged in fashioning their own eclectic theodicy from out of the Protestant ferment), while also delineating a distinct alterity.<sup>25</sup> Tudor Pole and the revivalists were obsessed with Celtic origins. They shared a desire to 'revive the residual and resistant cultural forms that were perceived to be equally ancient and linked across continents in racial and cultural sensibility' (Lennon 2004, 328), what Cousins described as an 'Aryan chain' (Cousins 1918, 33). The Irish revivalists held fast to the idea that Ireland's destiny was to spiritually re-invigorate Europe, and perhaps the world, through the re-discovery of an essential, Irish, Celtic spiritual heritage. Interwoven with these motifs was a semiotic connection to the 'Orient', identification with the 'mystic East', in an attempt to unite the colonized periphery of Empire, imagining a counterpoint to its acknowledged centre. Tudor Pole's political inclinations leant towards Fabian socialism and he espoused no particular sympathy for Irish issues.<sup>26</sup> Despite the colonial milieu in which he operated, there is no evidence that Tudor Pole espoused any racial or imperial tendencies, a charge sometimes levelled at proponents of Theosophy and the Irish revivalists, in particular Cousins who advocated notions of 'race tradition' (Lennon 2004, 328 & 343) while not necessarily advocating a hierarchical structure of race.<sup>27</sup>

If there is little evidence of direct links between Tudor Pole and the Irish revivalists, intersections can be found in mutual contacts and acquaintances. Sharpe (McLeod) and Yeats were known to each other and Yeats was at one time, along with George Russell and others, a Theosophist and involved with the Golden Dawn.<sup>28</sup> We can identify commonalities in their impulse and approach as occult practitioners even if the Irish artists were pursuing their vision through

<sup>25</sup> For his part, R.F. Foster characterised this movement as a response to estrangement and political isolation felt by Anglicans in an increasingly Catholicised Irish society (Foster 1993, 220). Selina Guinness agrees with the assessment of Vivien Mercier (Dillon 1994, 80) that the popularity of Theosophy among a core group of Irish Protestants from similar backgrounds might partly be in response to 'the stimulus of evangelicalism' (Guinness 2003, 14-27).

<sup>26</sup> There is little written directly concerning Tudor Pole's politics. He was connected to leading Fabians and was an advocate of women's suffrage. Interestingly, though he was in an exempt profession or business, he enlisted during the First World War as a private soldier. Before being persuaded to take a commission he agitated for an improvement in the conditions for enlisted men (Fenge 2010, 79-83).

<sup>27</sup> The concept of race in Cousins' work is explored in, Burleigh 1993. Theosophy, despite its universalistic message, has been accused of embodying 'European imperial traditions' in its hierarchies having been invariably under the control of white Europeans or Americans. This characterisation has been contested, most particularly by Santucci (2008, 37-63), who argues that Theosophical views on race relate to a long series of cyclic progressions, involving root races and sub-races, towards spiritual perfection. Lennon (2004, 328) finds it difficult to digest that the mahatmas who guide the philosophy, 'The White Lodge' or 'The Great White Brotherhood', by their designation perpetuate bias even on the astral plane. Theosophists would counter that this is an ethereally mediated system, a global esotericism, and not concerned with 'race' as we ordinarily understand the term. See, also, Besant 1972 and Washington 1993.

<sup>28</sup> For the revivalists connection to Theosophy, see, Lennon 2004, 329, Benham 1993, 102-103 and Abdo 2003, 98. On Yeats and the Golden Dawn see, Raine 1969, 112-148.

poetry, literature and painting, while Tudor Pole might be described as a religious specialist, engaged in an actual quest.<sup>29</sup> They shared in common an approach to the 'mystic East', though Tudor Pole's main thrust was to establish a new indigenous Christian figuration, fashioned around the Glastonbury vessel find. What is striking is how, in both cases, what may have presented as a discrete discourse incorporated such a broad variety of influences and interests.

In common with the Irish revivalists, Tudor Pole, was 'enmeshed in brotherhoods, fellowships and organisations promoting spirituality' (Abdo 2004, 100). While running a moderately successful business, he travelled widely in pursuit of various esoteric goals, championed spiritual centres across Britain and Ireland, was interested in Christian socialism and women's suffrage, and connected to some of the leading lights across a variety of contemporary movements journeying outside of mainstream Christianity (Abdo 2004, 96-98).<sup>30</sup> The interweaving of Celticism, Theosophy, Hermeticism, antiquarianism and origin legends in the construction of Tudor Pole's conceptual framework drew together various strands of the discourse around religion outside of mainstream Christianity, a fuller spectrum of which was epitomized by those gathered at the Deans Yard assemblage, and the subsidiary web of connections they represented. Tudor Pole considered himself 'a Universalist', belonging to 'the Schools of Mysteries', 'conversant with the tenets of the world's philosophies and religions' (Gaythorpe 1979, 116).<sup>31</sup> His Celticism and search for an authentic and indigenous Christian spirituality did not obviate his interest in Theosophy or Hermeticism and interaction with figures such as Wilberforce exposed him to an approach where wisdom and enlightenment were sought in exploration of the philosophies of the 'mystic East'.<sup>32</sup>

## *Conclusion*

The Celticist movement, as represented by Tudor Pole and his associates, made a significant contribution to a vibrant discourse on religion outside of mainstream Christianity during the period in question. As a grouping it was connected to a number of contemporary religious and social causes involving, in the main, high status individuals. It was transnational, juxtaposing as it did fundamental commonalities with the main thrust of the Celtic revival in Ireland, including an approach to the 'Orient' and points of identification with the 'mystic East'. Tudor Pole's endeavour to legitimate an artefact, the Glastonbury vessel or cup,<sup>33</sup> the motifs and meanings he had attached to it (including the sacredness of the landscape where it was recovered), and the role he conceived for it as a talisman

<sup>29</sup> Tudor Pole could be described, following Weber's typology, as in the 'magician' mould. See, Weber 1963, 20-31.

<sup>30</sup> Tudor Pole did sometimes struggle to make ends meet (Fenge 2010, 176-178).

<sup>31</sup> This is Tudor Pole's own retrospective assessment, writing in 1965.

<sup>32</sup> For Tudor Pole's own written 'credo', penned towards the end of his life, see, Tudor Pole & Lehman 1968, 18-21.

<sup>33</sup> The Cup is now in the care of the Chalice Well Trust in Glastonbury. Though not on public display, in July 2013 (through the good offices of the Trustees of the Trust) I was able to have a private sitting to view the artefact and was kindly shown the various properties and the well. The Chalice Well is indeed an integral and central element in the overall Glastonbury phenomenon.

for awakening a Christian revival in Britain and Ireland, formed the matrix of his religious framework. His central focus in the first decade of the twentieth century was the establishment of a western Christian sodality with its centre at Glastonbury, mystically joined with sacred sites in Scotland and Ireland, what we might describe as a new theodicy, an attempt to instigate a 'new reformation'.<sup>34</sup>

Tudor Pole, Alice Buckton (another of those attending Wilberforce's gathering to view the vessel) and others, shared a vision of a new Christian spiritual renewal in Britain through the reactivation of sacred sites in Iona (Scotland), Ireland and Glastonbury, with an emphasis on pilgrimage and the feminine.<sup>35</sup> According to Benham, Tudor Pole and his immediate associates 'felt they had inaugurated the Church of the New Age, a church in which woman was in the ascendant and Bride, the Celtic embodiment of the Universal Feminine, was restored and harmonized with a mystical understanding of the Christian faith' (Benham 1993, 50). Though not jointly involved in the vessel find, Tudor Pole and Buckton went on to have long (if separate) associations with Glastonbury and the 'restorying' of mythologies, to connect 'myth, belief story, vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality', providing, in the words of Marion Bowman, 'a constantly evolving means whereby varied groups of people interact with the past, the landscape and whatever they perceive as their spiritual goals' (Bowman 2012, 329).<sup>36</sup>

While all his beliefs and practices may seem retrospectively (as Bowman describes them), idiosyncratic, we might view Tudor Pole as something of a *bricoleur*,<sup>37</sup> reconstructing, remixing, and re-using ideas, signs and symbols towards creating new insights or meanings, but still located within a broad Christian paradigm as Tudor Pole and his companions, 'in their own way honoured Christianity' (Bowman 2000, 99). Tudor Pole's career as a *bricoleur* saw him journey beyond the confines of Britain in his search for ultimate meaning. It was during his second quest attempt in Constantinople, in the year 1908, that Tudor Pole (according to his own account), first heard of 'a group of Persians, known as Baha'is who were said to be associated with a movement for the promotion of peace and brotherhood among members of all religious faiths' (Tudor Pole 1968, 140). On further investigation he discovered that their leader, known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'son of the Founder of the Movement, Bahá'u'lláh, had been a prisoner for nearly forty years and was still confined with his family in the

<sup>34</sup> Moore analyses the response to Victorian religious uncertainty and attempts to elucidate new frameworks of belief in terms of 'theodicy' and, "New doctrine' based on 'new revelations'... creating a 'new faith' that would proclaim a 'new gospel' for a new social order...nothing less than a 'New Reformation'" (Moore 1990, 174-175).

<sup>35</sup> Alice Buckton's drama, 'The Coming of Bride', presented in Glastonbury (in the year 1914), unites the motifs of the valorisation of the feminine and the importance of sacred landscapes, while endeavouring to renew interest in Bride herself (Bowman 2012, 399).

<sup>36</sup> For Tudor Pole and Bucktons' relationship with Glastonbury see, Benham 1993 and Fenge 2010. See also, Villiers 1977 and Gaythorpe 1979. Tudor Pole is regarded as the founding father of the Chalice Well Trust, which has preserved important Glastonbury properties for prosperity. Tudor Pole's influence on how the property is run is still very much in evidence (Chalice Well Trust 2009).

<sup>37</sup> See, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris, 1962). English translation as *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966. Also helpful on the concept of *bricolage* is, Hartley 2002.

fortress city of Akka in Palestine' (Tudor Pole 1968, 140). It was the beginning of an intriguing connection which would involve Tudor Pole as a central actor in the reception in Britain of a religious reformer from Asia just a few years later. Indeed, all of the central figures present at the Deans Yard gathering, Tudor Pole, Wilberforce, Buckton, Campbell, and (to a lesser extent), Crookes, would each play significant roles in the reception of 'Abdu'l- Bahá in Britain. Important as it is to highlight the work of Tudor Pole and his associates as a significant facet of religious discourse being pursued in Britain at this time, his close engagement with a religious figure from Asia adds another level of interest. His quest, ultimately unsuccessful, to uncover documents he believed were long hidden in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, in order to establish the provenance of the vessel, brought him into contact with Bahá'ís for the first time. I intend, at a future stage in this project, to examine his role as a central actor in the reception of 'Abdu'l Bahá in Britain, the considerable time and energy he committed to supporting the Bahá'í movement over more than a decade, and how his worldview was elastic enough to accommodate such a close interaction with a religious system that had grown out of Asia.

The legacy of Tudor Pole's endeavours is best seen today at the Chalice Well properties in Glastonbury, the popular locus for an eclectic expression of Christian and alternative religiosity, which he founded in collaboration with others in 1959.<sup>38</sup> The question of his influence, through his activities and published writings, in the articulation of the accidence of the New Age phenomenon has yet to be explored.

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<sup>38</sup> See, Chalice Well Trust 2009, for a comprehensive overview of the properties and activities hosted there.

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