

RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "ON HUMAN ORIGINS"**Original Commentator:** Iraj Ayman**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4.1 (1991): 91**Author's Response:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3.2 (1990): 63-65

In his commentary, Iraj Ayman briefly notes his two concerns regarding Craig Loehle's article "On Human Origins," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.4 (1990): 45-58. The first concern relates to Loehle's inference that the Manifestations might be "somewhat subject to chance events" (3.2: 64), something Ayman finds inconceivable (i.e., that the Manifestations "are subject to random events which God does not intend for them" [4.1: 91]). Ayman's second and related point has to do with the legitimacy of Loehle's making an inference of this sort based solely on a single word or two from a translated passage without any consideration of the original Persian text. He states that "when using translations of the holy Writings, it would be helpful where making inferences on the basis of single words to examine the original Persian or Arabic texts and study the historical usage of such words in Persian and Arabic literature." Ayman then goes on to observe that such a process "has been a normal approach of students and scholars of religion. . . ."

While the tone and intent of Ayman's commentary are benign and the general sense of his observations helpful, I feel that his objections might well be misunderstood or misconstrued to the detriment of future Bahá'í scholarship. I am particularly concerned about the issue of the validity of inferences based on the language in the English translations of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets since such an observation might lead some to feel that scholarship which does not resort to the original Persian and Arabic texts might be suspect.

As Ayman correctly notes, English is not a language of Revelation, but the Guardian's English translations of the works of Bahá'u'lláh do have a special status which, I feel, refutes the general tenor of Ayman's observation. In a letter dated 15 November 1956 written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi specified that "his English translation" of a sacred text should form the "basis" for translations into other European languages. The Universal House of Justice elucidated this special status of the Guardian's translations in a letter of 8 December 1964:

. . . the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired Interpreter of the Holy Writings; thus, where a passage in Persian or Arabic could give rise to two different expressions in English he would know which one to convey. Similarly he would be much better equipped than an average translator to know which metaphor to employ in English to express a Persian metaphor which might be meaningless in literal translation.

Thus, in general speakers of other European tongues will obtain a more accurate translation by following the Guardian's English translation than by attempting at this stage in Bahá'í history to translate directly from the original.

This same letter notes that if one is familiar with Persian and Arabic and has the task of translating the writings of Bahá'u'lláh into another language, then one may refer to the original text:

This does not mean, however, that the translators should not also check their translations with the original texts if they are familiar with Persian or Arabic. There may be many instances where the exact meaning of the English text is unclear to them and this can be made evident by comparison with the original. . . .

From these authoritative observations about the special status of the Guardian's translations of the works of Bahá'u'lláh, we can infer, I believe, that it is not only sound for Loehle to make inferences based on the Guardian's translation from the original text but that indeed in many instances the Guardian's translations would prove superior to resorting to the original inasmuch as ambiguities in the original are interpreted and clarified.

Of course, at the heart of what Ayman is stating is not so much that the Guardian's translation is misleading or that Ayman can think of a more accurate rendering, but rather that Loehle has taken the single word *chance* to mean something quite beyond what Bahá'u'lláh seems to imply in this context. In effect, the problem here might not be that Loehle lacks an understanding of Persian or Arabic, but that he stretches the legitimate implications of what is intended by the English. Indeed, Ayman notes that in English the word *chance* may be taken to denote "happenings" and "events."

To some extent I agree with Ayman on this point; therefore, my comments may at first seem unduly finicky, but I do not feel they are. The fact that resorting to the original text is a "normal approach of students and scholars" does not necessarily mean that it is the correct procedure for a study of the Bahá'í writings. There are a number of common practices of students and scholars of religion that may seem logical and sound but which, in a Bahá'í context, are sadly lacking, even illogical and misleading. For example, a friend of mine who is a world-renowned scholar in religious studies adamantly rejects the idea that the Bahá'í Faith is not an "offshoot" of Islam. At first, I thought our disagreement was merely a matter of semantics—since the Bahá'í Faith was founded by former Muslims in a Muslim culture, he deemed it best to classify it as an offshoot, just as he would also classify Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism. But the more I tried to explain to him why I as a Bahá'í resisted such a term since it ignores the concept of divine intervention in human history in the form of Manifestations, the more I came to appreciate that what he really could not accept is the idea of religion as a spiritual event, or history as being empowered by unseen forces from an unseen realm. For this professor, and for the majority of scholars of religion with whom I converse, religion is not a thing of the spirit, not the educational process by which an unseen and essentially unknowable deity trains humankind. For such scholars, religion is a sociological

or anthropological or political phenomenon whose root causes and long-range effects are confined to empirically demonstrable occurrences. From such a perspective, God is largely an anthropomorphic wish, and the Manifestations are political reactionaries and revolutionaries. To these scholars, Christ did not come to fulfill the law, but to break it and to incite others to become equally lawless.

I have no doubt that the cause of this humanistic interpretation of religion results from the fact that scholars must swim about in the waters of a profession which, like the milieu of the Pharisaic Jews, is based on fact, law, tradition, empiricism, and not to any significant extent on a belief in a transcendent reality. Bahá'í scholars who dare swim in these same precarious waters thus do so with the awesome, sometimes humiliating, but always challenging job of unashamedly professing a belief in the influence in society and in history of unseen or spiritual forces. It is the same challenging dilemma that Bahá'ís in other professions have faced and will continue to face in upholding the Bahá'í beliefs regarding the unique perspective the Bahá'í Faith has regarding other controversial subjects, such as homosexuality, abortion, evolution, and other polarized issues where Bahá'ís have a position that does not align with either extreme, nor is it some middle ground. It is *sui generis*, logical but based on a belief in an unseen reality, which is inextricably related to every aspect of the phenomenal expression of that reality.

But how does all this relate to the matter of the Guardian's translations? It relates to the fact that for a Bahá'í scholar to say it is more valid to resort to the Guardian's English translations than to the original makes sense *only* if one accepts the authority conferred on the Guardian to render infallible and authoritative interpretations. In short, the validity resides in a belief in the station and authority of Bahá'u'lláh and his covenant, something the Bahá'í scholar can hardly expect a non-Bahá'í to accept. Nevertheless, if we do not explain this unique perspective, we are left to defend our reliance on the Guardian's work by citing standards "common amongst men." We might note, for example, that Shoghi Effendi was intimately familiar with the son of the prophet and therefore had access to the special meanings of these tablets; that he studied at a really fine university in England and therefore was quite adept at translation; or that he was a brilliant individual.

Any and all of these observations may be accurate, but they are not the true answer. The answer is that the Guardian had conferred upon him a power and authority beyond the capacity of ordinary scholars or ordinary Bahá'ís. Without that answer, Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike will be tempted to infer that the Guardian's translations are influenced by his personality, or the particular views he held, or the subtle influences of those with whom he associated. All of these factors would be valid considerations with "normal" or "accepted" scholarly practices and in other contexts, but in the context of Bahá'í belief they are not because they omit consideration of a demonstrable spiritual force working

throughout history to empower the prophets to confirm their covenants and to advance human civilization. For the Bahá'í scholar, it is this force, so sadly neglected in most contemporary scholarship in religious studies, that will so often have primacy in any study of religion.

There is another worthwhile point here. Ayman implies that to resort to the original Persian or Arabic would be helpful "where making inferences on the basis of single words . . . [to] study the historical usage of such words in Persian and Arabic literature." If Ayman here means that Bahá'u'lláh often employs allusions, metaphors, and commonplace literary devices drawn from other prophets, writers, and literary traditions, I agree. I would also agree that in due course it will be the job of Bahá'í scholars to uncover these allusions if we are to receive the full benefit of the rich literary legacy Bahá'u'lláh has bequeathed us. However, if Ayman means by this observation that the best path for discovering the meaning of a single word is to understand the historical usage of the word as opposed to the Guardian's translation of that word, I would disagree. Our task is not to discover how the word was commonly employed by others at the time, but the special sense it has in the context of a particular tablet.

This brings us to Ayman's objection to the theological or philosophical implications of Loehle's inference about the role of "chance" events in the life of the Manifestation, for while we may infer from the above statements about the authority of the Guardian's translations that Loehle is justified in making inferences based solely on Shoghi Effendi's translations, we may well conclude that Loehle has not drawn a *correct* inference.

Loehle does qualify his inference to say that the Manifestation is "*somewhat* subject to chance events" (italics added), but in general I agree with Ayman on this point. The phrase "ills and chances of this world" is similar to the phrase "changes and chances of this world" that Bahá'u'lláh employs in numerous other instances to indicate a general sense of worldly affairs or the usual trials and tribulations of this life. However, I disagree with the implication that this passage might not *also* include events which are not specifically foreordained by God. To accept this possibility would necessitate, as Ayman implies, that the Manifestations would therefore be "subject to random events which God does not intend for them." Obviously to accept the Bahá'í theological-cosmological perspective is to believe that, in the long run, all events are ultimately within the jurisdiction of God's omnipotence and eventually serve God's divine purposes of bringing forth by degrees a metaphorical expression of the spiritual realm in terms of social structures. But if we accept the existence of human free will to respond or not respond to the advent of the Manifestation, then we must also accept that certain events in the life of the Manifestation are contingent on human response.

To a certain extent this matter revolves around the age-old philosophical question of the simultaneous existence of free will and foreknowledge. For example, Bahá'u'lláh states that if he is killed, God will send another to take his

place in order to complete God's work—in effect, the course of human history is destined to work out according to divine plan. Since Bahá'u'lláh is not killed, do we then infer that he was not serious or that this was not really a possibility? Similarly, were the kings and rulers predestined not to respond to Bahá'u'lláh's message, or did humanity actually have a chance to enter the Most Great Peace a century ago? Likewise, was Bahá'u'lláh foredoomed to be opposed and persecuted, or could it have gone differently? When in *The Hidden Words* the statement is made, "Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee,"¹ do we not infer that the outcome of our spiritual development is, to some extent, in our own hands, that God has ordered our lives in such a way that he chooses to relinquish control over that outcome, even though he may foreknow it?

To me, this entire issue is a proof of divine authority and justice, not a refutation of it. That is, I infer from this capacity of humankind to accept or reject divine guidance that while we cannot deter the eventual outcome of events, we can certainly affect the course of our own history and make its progress more or less propitious. Regardless of how we treat the Manifestations or respond to their guidance, all will in due course work out as it is intended to, and in this larger sense, there is no such thing as chance, no possibility of alteration. But in the short term, God has ordained that various pathways may lead to the same essential outcome.

Surely this is what the Báb intended when he observed how human perversity has altered the intended course of religion, that our response to this force is not foreordained (though it is foreknown), and that even now our actions may determine the precise path by which human history on planet Earth works its way towards fruition:

In the Bayán the Báb says that every religion of the past was fit to become universal. The only reason why they failed to attain that mark was the incompetence of their followers. He then proceeds to give a definite promise that this would not be the fate of the Revelation of "Him Whom God would make manifest", that it will become universal and include all the people of the world. This shows that we will ultimately succeed. But could we not through our shortcomings, failures to sacrifice and reluctance to concentrate our efforts in spreading the Cause, retard the realization of that ideal?²

While the capacity of human beings to respond freely to the advent of the Manifestation might not precisely be a "chance" event (something that happens without motive or will), it does present the Manifestation with a variety of

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939) 4.

2. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, February 20, 1932, printed in *The Bahá'í Life* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 3–4.

circumstances that have the effect of randomness. Why, for example, does Bahá'u'lláh have Mírzá Áqá Ján dispose of "hundreds of thousands of verses," stating, "None is to be found at this time worthy to hear these melodies"?³ We must presume that when Bahá'u'lláh originally revealed these verses, he thought there might be such souls during this Dispensation. Was he mistaken, or did the inadequate response to his revelation cause him (or God working through him) to determine that what might have been a proper course of action had, through human response, become no longer viable for this Dispensation?

Of course, this is an endlessly fascinating subject, which I do not presume to respond to in any complete form. For example, was Mírzá Mihdí destined to fall through the skylight, or did he slip? Obviously Bahá'u'lláh (or God working through Bahá'u'lláh) was capable of transforming this seemingly unfortunate tragic event into a symbol of atonement and grace, a means of instructing humanity, but does that mean the event was preordained? Or take the more complicated issue: In some sense the Manifestations have free will. After contemplating his forthcoming martyrdom and after briefly considering the possibility of resisting that fate, Christ prays, "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). Likewise, after being ushered back to Baghdad from his two-year sojourn in Kurdistan and knowing full well that he was leaving behind him "days of peace and tranquillity" that "will never again fall to My lot," Bahá'u'lláh observed that "surrendering Our will to His, We submitted to His injunction."⁴

In other words, the Manifestations have souls and wills which, though beyond the limitations of human souls, are capable of contemplating self-interest as opposed to the divine will. Do we not infer, therefore, that they are not mere automatons of the divine will and, therefore, that they are not foreordained to acquiesce to the Will of God? This may seem like semantic minutiae—why would a divine emissary from the transcendent world be tempted by anything in this transitory life? But the point is that in some sense it is logically possible.

Obviously Ayman is entirely correct when he observes that all events in the life of the Manifestation have spiritual significance, something to teach us. In the *Súratu'l-Haykal* Bahá'u'lláh says:

Naught is seen in My temple but the Temple of God, and in My beauty but His Beauty, and in My being but His Being, and in My self but His Self, and in My movement but His Movement, and in My acquiescence but His Acquiescence, and in My pen but His Pen, the Mighty, the All-Praised. There hath not been in My soul but the Truth, and in Myself naught could be seen but God.⁵

3. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By*, rev.ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 138.

4. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 126.

5. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, rev.ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 109.

At the same time, it is in the response of the Manifestation to the contingencies of human free will and the "chances of this world" that we discover an important ingredient in the Will of God at work, the grace of God at every turn. Consequently, I would not presume to attribute to God the iniquity of Mírzá Yahyá, the fall of Mírzá Mihdí, the failure of the kings and rulers to recognize the divine wisdom in Bahá'u'lláh's epistles, or the general opposition to Bahá'u'lláh by the ecclesiasts. Neither do I believe that history could not have occurred quite differently than the way it has, though the overall, abiding path and pattern of our planet's progress is secure from its beginning.

As to whether or not the Manifestations know with certainty every event that will occur to them or which events are divinely ordained and which are contingent on human response, or on the changes and chances of this world, I do not pretend to know. Regarding the time of the coming of the "Son of Man" (Bahá'u'lláh), Christ says, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36), implying either that the event was contingent on human action or that Christ did not possess the long-term foreknowledge that uniquely belongs to God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Bahá'u'lláh after becoming a Bábí "mixed openly with His enemies. He was occupied in showing forth evidences and proofs and was recognized as the Herald of the Word of God. In many changes and chances He endured the greatest misfortunes, and at every moment He ran the risk of being martyred."⁶ Had Bahá'u'lláh been martyred, no doubt God would have raised One in his stead to complete the task of transforming the world. Ancient prophecies foretell that it is Bahá'u'lláh who will usher in this age of maturity, and they also indicate that human perversity would not allow the advent of the Most Great Peace without the necessity of a transitional period in which there will be a "fiery ordeal."⁷ But does this mean these events were necessary and predestined, or simply that we as a species are predictably perverse? For me, a clue to the answer lies in Bahá'u'lláh's observation that the present and impending crises afflicting humankind result from human free will and poorly made choices: "The promised day is come, the day when tormenting trials will have surged above your heads, and beneath your feet, saying: 'Taste ye what your hands have wrought!'"⁸

JOHN S. HATCHER

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 4th ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 28.

7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) 136.

8. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day is Come*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 3.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY**Commentator:** John S. Hatcher**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.2 (1992): 60–66.**Authorized Translations**

I have clearly and emphatically reiterated that I had no intention of questioning the efficacy, the validity, and the supremacy of the translations rendered by Shoghi Effendi. As a matter of fact, those whose mother tongues are Persian or Arabic and who are fully versed in these languages and who also know English appreciate the special value of and need for the English translation of the holy writings rendered by Shoghi Effendi. There are often points of clarification as to the exact or proper meaning of certain terms or phrases in the original Persian or Arabic text that can only be gained by referring to Shoghi Effendi's translation. Thus, the need for examining both the original text and the translation is shared in common by scholars who use the original texts as well as those who use Shoghi Effendi's translation. Scholarly studies may be based on translations of the Bahá'í writings. However, in so doing we have to bear in mind that a substantial portion of what has been revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, as well as most of the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, have not yet been translated. Therefore, there is naturally some limitation in making inferences based purely on what is now available in translation.

Furthermore, translations, no matter how masterly or even *inspired*, are always subject to certain intrinsic limitations. Shoghi Effendi, when writing on the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, has the following words of caution for us:

Such testimonies bearing on this theme are impregnated with such power and reveal such beauty as *only those who are versed in the languages in which they were originally revealed can claim to have sufficiently appreciated*.¹

He even, through his secretary, has stated:

The translations will continue to vary as more and better translations are made. Shoghi Effendi does not consider even his own translations as final.²

He does not believe there is anyone at present capable of translating the passages you referred to in *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá* into befitting and accurate English.³

1. Emphasis added. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 103.

2. Letter to an individual, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and dated 14 August 1930.

3. Letter to an individual, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and dated 15 July 1947.

The Universal House of Justice, in a letter to an individual, provides us with the following guidance:

Even our beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art [translation] amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* as "one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however *inadequate*, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the Writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation" and he expressed the hope "that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as *the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless utterances.*"⁴

Therefore, I agree with John Hatcher that we should be concerned about the extent of the validity of inferences based on the language in the English translations of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets, because, as Hatcher said, "scholarship which does not resort to the original Persian and Arabic texts might be suspect" (60). The scholar does not necessarily need to be personally versed in those languages; it will be enough to seek the collaboration of those who possess such expertise. This has been the systematic practice of eminent scholars unversed in Persian and Arabic, such as the late Hand of the Cause of God George Townshend and Dr. Udo Schaefer.

Inferences Based on Single Words

The main point in my humble note was "... when using translations of the holy Writings, it would be *helpful* where making inferences on the basis of single words, to examine the original Persian or Arabic texts and study the historical usage of such words in Persian and Arabic literature" (4.1: 91, emphasis added). First, I had only said "it would be helpful" not imperative. Second, it is a well-known fact that there are not always words in the two languages concerned to convey exactly the same meaning(s) and connotation(s). The word chosen to be the basis of inference may have various meanings and connotations, only one of which is what the translation intends to convey. Without ascertaining which one of those meanings is chosen to render the meaning of the word in the original text, we may be misled by using a different connotation of that word in English. That is what I tried to point out in my original note.

In a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, it is stated that "when in 1947, one of the friends offered to translate the *Seven Valleys* directly from the Persian into German, Shoghi Effendi pointed out that the ideas associated with such a 'mystical work' required not only a command of these languages [Persian and German] but also 'a deep familiarity with original literature in the original and oriental usage and thought'."⁵ And elsewhere the Universal House of Justice gives the following elucidation:

4. Emphasis added. Letter to an individual believer dated 8 December 1964.

5. Letter dated 27 May 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.

When the beloved Guardian was making the translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.⁶

The guidance given by Shoghi Effendi regarding the procedure to be followed in translations to be made into other European languages and quoted by Hatcher is concerned with an entirely different matter from the point made in my comments. Certainly, Bahá'ís are in no doubt that the translations made by Shoghi Effendi "have a special status" as I also clearly stated in my note.⁷ I sincerely hope I will not be continuously and repeatedly accused of something I neither wrote nor implied.

In making inferences based on single words, we do need to investigate the background and the history, the usage, meanings, and connotations of that word in both the original language as well as in the translation and to examine in what context it has been used and what meaning is intended for it to render. This of course includes the special usage of certain words in Bahá'í terminology. I do not think that such routine practice in scholarly studies should be disregarded by Bahá'í scholars because of their "belief in the influence in society and in history of unseen or spiritual forces," as argued by Hatcher (62). Hatcher's discussion of the Bahá'í approach to scholarly studies is valid; however, it goes beyond the simple point that I wanted to be taken into consideration.

It is obvious that the language and words used by the Manifestation of God and authorized interpreters are the languages and words used and understood by people. Otherwise, how could the people being addressed understand the message conveyed to them? In the Bahá'í writings there are new meanings bestowed to certain words generating more profound and precise terminology. However, each word has a history and a life of its own that cannot be ignored when the word is used for communication with the people using the language. Is it really practical to maintain that there is no relation between "how the word was commonly employed by others at the time" and "the special sense it has in the context of a particular tablet"? Original usage and context are so interrelated that by divesting the words of their "original usage" we shall not be able, as cautioned by the Guardian, to understand the message properly.

Role of "Chance" in the Life of the Manifestations

In Bahá'í terminology, the "Manifestation of God" refers to one who manifests all the attributes of God. My question was how the Manifestations of God could be subject to random events God does not intend for them. Such a statement embodies a clear contradiction. We have ample evidence in the

6. Letter dated 12 August 1973, from the Universal House of Justice to a national spiritual assembly.

7. *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4.3 (1991): 73-74.

life histories of the Manifestations, particularly the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, that as Manifestations of God, whatever happened to them was divinely ordained and that they in their divine station had foreknowledge of such events.⁸ As a matter of fact, most of what happened to them was even foretold in the scriptures of previous dispensations.

However, I fully agree with Hatcher on the role of the free will of the individual. In this connection I would like to recall the famous statement of Shoghi Effendi printed in *Citadel of Faith* where he gives a vivid picture of the vital role of individual believers and says:

Without his [individual] support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the national representative of the community to which he belongs, is foredoomed to failure. *The World Center of the Faith* itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the Divine Plan Himself is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His design are lacking. The sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Founder of the Faith, will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part.⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like us to be reminded that what we study and write about is directed to a purpose. Therefore, before embarking on a piece of scholarly work we have to examine whether it would have any useful purpose. We, I am sure, do not intend to spend our time in pursuits which "begin with words and end with words" and cannot "profit the peoples of the earth."¹⁰

When we write on the Bahá'í Faith, we should always remember these words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the one true

8. For example, in the Tablet to Násiri'd-dín *Shah*, Bahá'u'lláh has revealed: "This [Bahá'u'lláh] is but a leaf which the winds of the will of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised, have stirred" (*The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh* [Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972] 57). In *Luh-i-Salman*, Bahá'u'lláh has revealed a categorical statement that whatever we notice in this world even if it appear to be contrary to the outward will of the Manifestations of God, in reality all are and will be by the will of God (Fadil-i-Mazandarani, A. *Amr va Khaalq*, vol. 1 [Hofheim-Langenhain, Germany: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1985] 93).

9. Emphasis added. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947-1957* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965) 130-31.

10. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) 52.

God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i-Hikmat: "The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 141). Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. *God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.*¹¹

May the pages of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* always be a mirror reflecting the best manifestations of these guiding words of Bahá'u'lláh.

IRAJ AYMAN

11. Emphasis added. "Writers and Writing," *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2 (Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) 407.

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Commentators: Iraj Ayman and John Hatcher

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I would like to thank several authors who have commented on "On Human Origins" for helping me to sharpen my thinking on this important topic. In the vast quantity of Bahá'í writings, I was subsequently able to find references to chance and fate that are not at all ambiguous and thus did not need the controversial reference of Bahá'u'lláh to the prophets' being subject to chance (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 72–73). The lesson here is that one should not overemphasize individual words of revelation; instead, one should depend on clear explanations and multiple references to establish a point. Past religions have gone aground on individual words, and major schisms have resulted from interpretations of single phrases.

In this day, part of the shield that protects Bahá'ís from schism is the sheer volume of the Bahá'í writings, in which the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith expounded their views at length and on multiple occasions. If, in one passage, the phrasing is such that we personally do not understand it, or the translation is imperfect, or difficult words are used, we can refer to other passages on the same topic. If all such passages clearly say the same thing, we probably understand it correctly. If not, reference back to the original languages or deeper reflection on the topic is probably necessary. This is the solution that I offer to the dilemma posed by Ayman.

At this stage, it is unreasonable to expect all Bahá'í scholars to have mastered Persian and Arabic. As to Hatcher's argument that Shoghi Effendi's translations are adequate, it may very well be that they are, but this will only be of assistance to native speakers of English. Those speaking other languages will be working with Bahá'í writings in their own tongues, and these editions will not have been perfectly translated. Does this mean that such people are completely left out of Bahá'í scholarship? An option for such scholars is the use of multiple references from the Writings for any potentially crucial point. Multiple referencing makes use of the scientific principle of information redundancy. It is common practice in computing and telecommunications to encode some information with redundancy so that checks can be made on data integrity or correctness of signal transmission. The same applies to the Bahá'í writings: most of the major teachings are reiterated in multiple formats, styles, and even languages, thus reducing ambiguity. When comparing several passages on the same topic, only the interpretation that is compatible with all of them is likely to be correct. Thus, rather than insisting that only original references be used (an ideal but currently unattainable goal) or arguing that

Shoghi Effendi's translations are adequate, we should aim for robustness of referencing and avoid quibbling over single words or passages entirely.

Regarding whether the prophets are subject to chance, it seems to me that the same key significance attaches to the role of chance in both the life of the prophets and in evolution. In both cases, the existence of chance seems to contradict the existence of the divine Will. It is not helpful to argue that the fall of every leaf and raindrop is God's Will, because this brings us to predestination and the elimination of free will, a central premise of the Bahá'í Faith. My view is that this matter of chance is in fact at the heart of the divine mystery and is one of the evidences of the power of God.

Similarly, the role of chance in evolution is very important. I would next like to offer a revised version of my interpretation of the role of chance in evolution in the context of the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that events in the world have three causes: accidental, necessary, and voluntary.¹ Accidental relationships or properties or events in our modern terminology are not without cause but are unpredictable. Examples include throwing a certain face value on a die, the exact spot that a leaf falling from a tree will land, where lightning will strike, etc. These things have causes, but the causes are so complicated and unobservable that we say that they are random or stochastic. This is what I mean by a chance event. A necessary property is one that is fundamentally a part of that thing: "... the inherent property of a thing can in no wise be dissociated from it. . . ."² A very clear example of such a property is gravity. Any object with mass will attract other objects to it according to a fixed relationship. It is not possible to separate gravity from an object and have an object without gravity. These laws are manifestations of God's purpose in that God established these laws, but they operate independently of active divine intervention. Voluntary causes are those attributable to free agents able to exercise their will, such as human beings.

Bahá'u'lláh gives an explanation of fate and chance in the following:

Know thou, O fruit of My Tree, that the decrees of the Sovereign Ordainer, as related to fate and predestination, are of two kinds. Both are to be obeyed and accepted. The one is irrevocable, the other is, as termed by men, impending. To the former all must unreservedly submit, inasmuch as it is fixed and settled. God, however, is able to alter or repeal it. As the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all, therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed and confidently abide by the same.

The decree that is impending, however, is such that prayer and entreaty can succeed in averting it.³

1. *Bahá'í World Faith*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 342.

2. *Bahá'í World Faith* 342.

3. *Gleanings*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 133.

'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates upon this topic:

Fate is of two kinds: one is decreed, and the other is conditional or impending. The decreed fate is that which cannot change or be altered, and conditional fate is that which may occur. So, for this lamp, the decreed fate is that the oil burns and will be consumed; therefore, its eventual extinction is a decree which it is impossible to alter or to change because it is a decreed fate. In the same way, in the body of man a power of life has been created, and as soon as it is destroyed and ended, the body will certainly be decomposed, so when the oil in this lamp is burnt and finished, the lamp will undoubtedly become extinguished.

But conditional fate may be likened to this: while there is still oil, a violent wind blows on the lamp, which extinguishes it. This is a conditional fate. It is wise to avoid it, to protect oneself from it, to be cautious and circumspect.⁴

These quotations seem to support the concept that chance and accident exist in the world. The existence of chance or accident does not invalidate the inevitability of large-scale predestined events such as the occurrence of a prophet and the triumph of that prophet's cause, however.

The third type of causation is voluntary, of which divine Will is an instance. In earlier periods, divine Will was popularly assumed to be responsible for the fall of every leaf and drop of rain, and individuals were considered to be largely subject to fate. In the Bahá'í view, such detailed manipulation of the natural world by God violates the existence of human free will, upon which our spiritual progress depends: Without free will, we cannot choose to do good and therefore cannot be held accountable for doing evil.⁵ The necessity for free will leads inevitably to the existence of an imperfect world.⁶ God intervenes only to further the goal of humanity's cultural evolution. God's Will operates according to its own set of divine laws and manifests itself particularly clearly in the person of the prophet and in the surrounding events. Divine Will is popularly perceived as producing "miracles," but it is also manifest in terms of revelation, dreams, visions, and coincidences. Such events surround the person of the prophet and propel religious events forward. As noted above, although divine Will is a force that operates in the world today and can affect individual lives, not everything that happens can be called God's Will. Nor are we as individuals necessarily privileged to know which events are part of God's plan.

In the Bahá'í view, humanity did not merely evolve accidentally; instead, it was God's purpose for creation that humanity should arise.⁷ Humanity's origin

4. *Some Answered Questions*, trans. L. C. Barney, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 244.

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 248–50 and William Hatcher, *Logic and Logos* (Oxford, George Ronald, 1990).

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 248.

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 196–97.

can be viewed as the unfolding of God's Plan. 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the analogy of a seed holding within it the potential of the tree. Similarly, the earliest life contained the potential for humanity, though not in the sense of a mere unfolding, as in the earlier view of the homunculus curled up in the sperm cell. Geneticists discredited this view years ago because of the role of chance in evolution.⁸ Evolution is influenced by three major components of chance: chance mutations, chance extinctions, and chance migrations. Humanity was thus not preordained in a programmed manner because any one of hundreds of chance events could have deflected the path actually taken by human evolution.

The Bahá'í view is not that the earliest life had a step-by-step plan for evolution but instead that it contained the potentialities that unfolded because of evolution, which, as has often been remarked, tends gradually to produce higher, more complex forms. In this view, the unfolding of higher forms by degrees is the way God works. Individuals, cultures, species, knowledge, and individual intelligences must all go through a process of development. We see that the Bahá'í view is inherently and fundamentally evolutionary. Biological evolution, individual development, and cultural advancement are all aspects of one fundamental process. This is how God has ordained the world to work. Evolution, rather than being in conflict with religion, is at the very heart of God's purpose and way of working. This is a fundamentally new view of the very nature of religion, in distinct contrast to the static worldviews and philosophies of the past.

We can recognize, therefore, three components in human origins. First, the lawlike component of evolution gradually leads to higher forms. More recent, advanced organisms tend to have larger brains, greater internal homeostasis, and more advanced sensory abilities and adaptive behaviors. Larger brains increase survival and lengthen lifespan. Second, chance leads to random variations (e.g., many of the randomly derived differences among individuals) and random origins and extinctions. Third, I postulate (the Bahá'í writings do not specify this) that divine Will may have operated at times to help guide the process toward humanity; it was God's intention from the beginning that humanity should arise. In this view, the same mode of action for God is postulated to have acted in the past as it acts today, that is, subtle interventions that further God's Plan of an advancing civilization for humanity. Thus, God's role in human origins is one of a periodic intervenor in the natural process of development of higher forms called biological evolution. This is a plausible

8. T. Dobzhansky and E. Boesiger, *Human Culture: A Moment in Evolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

explanation: if you believe, from faith or evidence, that God is active in our world today, as Bahá'ís believe, then God's role in human origins can be seen as consistent with that belief.⁹

CRAIG LOEHLE

9. The above, revised views on chance, evolution, and information redundancy are presented more thoroughly in my book *On the Shoulders of Giants* (Oxford: George Ronald, forthcoming).