RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON “ON HUMAN ORIGINS”

Original Commentator: Iraj Ayman

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 Loehrle 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 Loehrle 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 Loehrle 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


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”? 

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.”

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 minувie—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.

4. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By 126.
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 Mirzā Yahyá, the fall of Mirz̧á 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.” 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.” 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!’ ”

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