

*Baha'i Studies Review* 12 (2004) 139–143

## COMMENTARY

What is a Man? Some Thoughts on 'Abdu'l-Baha's Explanation of Evolution

COMMENTARY on Keven Brown's 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to Darwinism: Its Historical and Philosophical Context' in Keven Brown (ed.), *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief*, Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions, vol. 12. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2001, pp. 1-134

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Charles Loyseau (1566-1627), a legal expert in Paris, is one of the first authors to have understood that the way man is defined carries major consequences for the social and political order. He writes in his *Traité des ordres et simples dignités*: '... l'âme raisonnable des hommes, venant immédiatement de Dieu . . . n'a point de participation naturelle aux qualités de la semence générative du corps, où elle est colloquée' (the rational soul of men, which comes immediately from God . . . does not participate by nature in the qualities of the body's generative seed, with which it is associated).<sup>1</sup> In putting forth this concept, which was Cartesian before its time, and was in opposition to the teachings of the doctors of the Sorbonne in Paris (who were holding to a Thomist doctrine in which the soul is much more bound to the body – a doctrine so much more favourable to the feudal order), he produces a powerful argument for his main thesis: common men are able as much as noblemen to hold royal commissions (since parents cannot transmit a noble spirit).

I think that a new definition of man has consequences so deep that it could give birth to a new civilization; and that, since Darwin, it is not possible to propose a conception of man without proposing a conception of evolution: each will shape the other. Since 'Abdu'l-Baha proposed both, both must be explained together. To treat the subject of Baha'i conception of evolution without treating in depth the matter of Baha'i anthropology leads to the risk of manipulating words and concepts as if their meaning were evident and shared by all. I will try here to demonstrate both the importance of Baha'i anthropology and the coherency of 'Abdu'l-Baha's thought.

### Baha'i Anthropology

Let me first admit that prior to reading Keven Brown's essay 'Abdu'l-Baha's Response to Darwinism: Its Historical and Philosophical Context', I had some preconceived ideas of what an essay on 'Abdu'l-Baha's conception of evolution should contain, following a close reading of both Jean-Marc Lepain's seminal work, *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu: Ontologie des mondes divins dans les écrits de Baha'u'llah*,<sup>2</sup> and 'Abdu'l-Baha's Some

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Loyseau, *Traité des ordres et simples dignités* (Paris: A. L'Angelier, 1613) chapter 4, *De l'ordre de la noblesse en général*. The quotation follows the original edition, but I have modernized the spelling. The English translation is mine.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bahai-biblio.org/biblio\\_doc\\_ouvrage\\_prophetie.htm](http://www.bahai-biblio.org/biblio_doc_ouvrage_prophetie.htm), hereinafter *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu*.

*Answered Questions*.<sup>3</sup> Lepain devotes the second of the three parts of his work (titled ‘The Theosophy’) to Baha’i anthropology. For example, he puts stress on this passage in *Some Answered Questions*, which states that ‘the body is but an accident of the spirit’: ‘Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident – that is to say, the body – be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains.’<sup>4</sup> I understand this passage as signifying that if the dwellers of the Zoltar planet had ten arms and twenty legs, this would not prevent them from being accounted as human beings (which is largely a free interpretation of mine, but one that I think can be justified). For if the body is but an accident, the bodily form affected by a human being cannot be of much importance.

Lepain explains at length that Baha’i anthropology is much more complex than the simple dichotomy between body and soul. Two passages from *Some Answered Questions* are important for the rest of the argument:

The vegetable spirit is the power of growth which is brought about in the seed through the influence of other existences.

The animal spirit is the power of all the senses, which is realized from the composition and mingling of elements; when this composition decomposes, the power also perishes and becomes annihilated . . .

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.<sup>5</sup>

When we consider beings with the seeing eye, we observe that they are limited to three sorts – that is to say, as a whole they are either mineral, vegetable or animal, each of these three classes containing species. Man is the highest species because he is the possessor of the perfections of all the classes – that is, he has a body which grows and which feels. As well as having the perfections of the mineral, of the vegetable and of the animal, he also possesses an especial excellence which the other beings are without – that is, the intellectual perfections. Therefore, man is the most noble of beings.<sup>6</sup>

In *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu*, Lepain underlines the differences between the rational soul, or spirit (*rúh*), our god-like ego and the soul (*nafs*) where reside the ego, the thought, the sensations and feelings, which is also the animal spirit. He explains that ‘the reflection of the spirit (*rúh*) in the mirror of the body, which creates the transitory phenomenon of the soul (*nafs*), is possible only when the body has attained to a sufficient degree of maturity and its parts are in harmony.’ He adds that ‘at the time of death, the soul (*nafs*) disappears with the body, which cannot be effected without a deep transformation of the conscience. It is enlarged, since it has now direct access to the spiritual realities, but at the same time it is brutally despoiled of all the idiosyncrasies we are used to considering as a determinant

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (trans. Laura Clifford Barney, Wilmette, Ill: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 239.

<sup>5</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 208.

<sup>6</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 235.

element of our personality. That shows how our personality and our human identity are illusory.’<sup>7</sup>

It would, in my opinion, have been better if Brown had treated in depth the question of Baha’i anthropology, and early in the book (in order that the contemporary Western reader might understand that, when ‘Abdul-Baha speaks of vegetable, animal or man, he does so with an unfamiliar meaning; for the reader may misconstrue the words of ‘Abdu’l-Baha by applying to them definitions common in the West) and had also explained the notion of ‘classes’ which divide species. Brown mentions the different kingdoms (pp. 86-88) but does not follow this up by expounding an anthropology or by connecting the concept of kingdom with the concept of species. In the other part of *Evolution and Bahá’í Belief* Eberhard von Kitzing treats that question (‘The Origin of Complex Order in Biology: ‘Abdul-Baha’s Concept of the “Originality of Species” Compared to Concepts in Modern Biology’ 198-202). But von Kitzing does not underline the more important point, which is that the concept of classes, or kingdoms, as an exposition of the Baha’i anthropology, suffices to explain that man is not an animal, without any recourse to the concept of species. Of course, it seems at first insufficient to affirm that man is not descended from the animal – but I will come back to this point in the second part of this commentary.

Unfortunately, Baha’i anthropology does not play a leading part in Brown’s article: it is not until note 274 that he writes, drawing on *Some Answered Questions* (pp. 151 and 143): ‘once the human spirit, i.e. the rational soul, comes into existence, it continues forever. But the other spirits, such as the plant and animal spirits, are perishable.’ Brown’s exposition is sufficient to explain that the animal man is from a species different from the animal monkey, as the latter is from the animal dog, and therefore the monkey cannot produce a man, as neither can the man produce a monkey. But I feel that, in order to state with ‘Abdu’l-Baha that all human beings can be put in a category and all animals in another, and that the first group cannot belong with the second, both the explanation in terms of species (i.e. the influence of a certain essence) and the brief passage of note 274 are very unsatisfactory or at any rate too short: why omit the notion of classes? Why never have recourse to arguments other than those related to the species?

### **Coherency of the doctrine of evolution with the remainder of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s teachings**

‘Abdu’l-Baha’s exposition contains one more difficulty of explanation, in the affirmation that man ever was: ‘Therefore, it cannot be said there was a time when man was not . . . Therefore, it is inconceivable that the worlds of existence, whether the stars or this earth, were once inhabited by the donkey, cow, mouse and cat, and that they were without man.’<sup>8</sup>

In Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophism,<sup>9</sup> an interesting concept of evolution is devised: man is man, because he is endowed with a spirit, a rational soul, as opposed to all the other living beings. On the other hand, he possesses, in common with animals, an animal component, with the plants and animals, a vegetal component, and, with all that is, a mineral component. Man existed from the beginning of creation, and existed then alone. Then he shed his surplus of mineral, then of vegetal, then of animal, giving birth in the process in

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marc Lepain, *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu*, chapter X, ‘Conséquences philosophiques de la psychologie bahá’íe.’ My translation.

<sup>8</sup> Brown in *Evolution and Bahá’í Belief* 90-91, quoting a revised translation of *Some Answered Questions*.

<sup>9</sup> A traditional exposition of the anthroposophist conception of evolution is found in Roy Wilkinson’s, *Man and Animal* (Stourbridge, England: The Robinswood Press, 1990).

turn to plants and animals. In this perspective, the appearance of the soul and the spirit is but their manifestation, permitted by the refinement of the body. Thus anthroposophism overcomes the challenge of keeping its internal coherency as a spiritualist doctrine, while accepting evolution.

I do not mean to say that Steiner's and 'Abdu'l-Baha's teachings are the same, or that a perfect coherency in 'Abdu'l-Baha's writings is to be found at whatever cost. But the anthroposophist conception, in its main lines as expounded above, is a conception of evolution compatible with the rest of 'Abdu'l-Baha's teachings.

In March and April 2003, I exchanged on the list H-Bahai some views with Keven Brown about several points in his article, points that had disappointed me. In spite of its many qualities, the article seemed to me to be incomplete on the issue I deemed the most important, fundamental even, that is, the conception of man. I considered that this lack of a clear definition of the nature of man causes a great prejudice to the exposition of 'Abdu'l-Baha's doctrine. On pp. 90-91, Brown comments on the quotation cited above (containing among other things: 'Therefore, it cannot be said there was a time when man was not') thus: "'Abdu'l-Baha focuses on the necessity of the eternal existence of the human species to act as a comprehensive mirror of God's created names and attributes.' On H-Bahai, Brown did develop this idea in the sense I had perceived: for him, the essence of man (the human species) always existed, but man did not. On 31 March 2003 he wrote:

I feel that the human soul and the body (i.e. man as individuals), according to 'Abdu'l-Baha's position, is something that emerges during the process of evolution. The only part of man that precedes physical evolution is his archetype or essence, which is not individual man, but something by which all men are rational beings. This is why man has always been man, and not an arbitrary derivation of evolution.

I concluded that for Brown, the potentiality of the appearance of man, body, soul and spirit, and the existence of a timeless essence (the human species) are enough to affirm that man always existed.

In *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu*, writing on the spirituality of the soul, Lepain emphasizes the traps set for Western philosophy by Greek philosophy, and how 'Abdu'l-Baha had succeeded in avoiding them by saying that the body is the accident and the spirit the essence. The theory of evolution is another trap, a trap awaiting any spiritualist philosophy. It is easier to affirm a spiritualist anthropology in a creationist outlook: if man were created in the beginning of the creation as he is now, many problems do not even appear. On the contrary, evolution necessitates an explanation for the appearance of both soul and spirit. Brown's position seems to me to get back to man's body as the essence of man. If 'the human soul . . . emerges during the process of evolution', man is fully man only from a determined degree of bodily perfection (the existence of a species' essence, which would programme the appearance of man does not matter: nothing happens as long as the body is not perfect enough). This theory gives so much importance to the body that the continuance of the spirit after death is in jeopardy, as well as the unity of races or sexes, and the humanity of the bodily or mentally disabled. For if the body is so necessary, how may we affirm, with solid arguments, that the spirit survives the death of the body, or, with more than good sentiments, that the bodily differences between races or sexes are unimportant? Besides, the body as accident of the spirit is for me the principal philosophical base of the Baha'i principle of the unity of the races and the sexes, the social and political consequences of which are evident: whatever the bodily differences, there is no difference in the quality of the spirit.

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## WHAT IS A MAN?

I find it necessary, if the coherency of the whole of the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Baha is to be preserved, to affirm the existence of man, body, soul and spirit, ever since the Big Bang, and not simply as a potentiality. So far no other theory seems to me to answer adequately to this necessity for coherency.