

## **A Critique of Survival of the Fittest and the Human: a spiritual approach**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the relevance of the concept described since the 19th century as "survival of the fittest". It does so in relation to the one human race, homo sapiens, and examines its application thereto from a spiritual point of view, in contrast to those theories based on forms of scientific materialism. It notes that much of the life, philosophy and practices in contemporary society still carry baggage derived from or reflective of this concept. When taken to the extreme or when applied with vigour, it can result in a great deal of human suffering and injustice. It argues that the thinking based on this concept is not inherent to the human condition but is the result of inculcation through life experiences and education, and can be changed by right education. The remedy, it argues, lies in a spiritual education, an education that postulates changes in thinking and practices to emphasize our common spiritual links as one interdependent human race on one small planetary homeland.

### **What is "survival of the fittest?"**

This concept has no precise meaning. But it is perhaps more than the inherent will to live which every organism has. And it must be more than just striving for excellence, or for a "fair go" for the individual concerned, without regard to others. One simple definition that has been given is:

*"You can use the survival of the fittest to refer to a situation in which only the strongest people or things continue to live or be successful, while the others die or fail."*<sup>1</sup>

This can refer to any organism. In this wider form it refers primarily to the use of the organism's physical strength to live in a certain way in relation to another. Without the "other" it does not seem to meet the definition. That is, it can sometimes be used to refer to the exercise of the strength and capacity by one in

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/survival-of-the-fittest>

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order to subordinate another in a competitive or forceful way. It may be seen as being primarily a masculine thing, although not necessarily so. It of course can extend to the use of overbearing techniques and practices that do not amount to actual direct physical force. It carries in its extreme form an intent to live by total domination or superior overwhelming force, even in some cases to the point of leading to the death of the "other". And it can be used either with reference to individuals that seek to survive and prosper over others, or to groups such as tribes or nations that seek to survive and prosper as such over other groups. In relation to nations, Brown wrote:

*"According to this idea, it is natural and desirable for one nation to behave aggressively toward another and to dominate it for its own benefit"*<sup>2</sup>

It can also extend not only to the struggle to survive by an organism but also for it to reproduce. Thus it can refer to the struggle to survive within the same species, the struggle carrying with it the ability to reproduce as an aspect of natural selection. On the views of Malthus<sup>3</sup>, organisms had to over reproduce in order for a species to survive, leading to the struggle that is at the heart of the concept.

The term, as will be discussed later, has come to be associated with the Darwinian concept of evolution. And in this context a somewhat different definition of the term is sometimes advanced. For example, the following quote was attributed to Darwin, and perhaps briefly summarizes his position even if not an accurate Darwinian quote:

*"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, not the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."*

In this sense it must still be part of the struggle to survive and reproduce, even if by adaptation.

### **The ancient history**

The debate is ongoing as to the nature of the ancient human in primitive society, and how the struggle to live impacted on that person. It ranges from a view

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<sup>2</sup>Keven Brown, *Evolution & Baha'i Belief*, (2001) Kalimat Press, 112.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Robert Malthus, 1766-1834.

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that envisaged a brutal competitive human in early society<sup>4</sup>, to a more peaceful, human nature that was basically good, but which became corrupted by society<sup>5</sup>. Some have argued, including Hobbes, that humans were inherently selfish and aggressive in nature, perhaps in response the rigours of survival in earlier times. But increasingly of late, emphasis has also been placed more on the cooperative factor in early human nature, including as it impacted upon human evolution.<sup>6</sup> It seems that humans are capable of both aggression and cooperation, depending on the context and motivations.

On this last point it is suggested that ancient humans did develop sophisticated systems of cooperation. One comment is as follows:

*"APPROACHES TO SURVIVAL With all the signs of injury, disease, and death, one might wonder how our early ancestors survived at all. But this gives the wrong picture. Although early hominins may have been relatively defenceless from a physical standpoint, part of their primate heritage included impressive defenses against predators, including being social and vocal. Primates in social groups keep watch over each other. Together, they can stay aware of predators and may gang up to scare them away. Many primates have warning calls as well; some are specific to attacks from birds, snakes, and leopards. Social and vocal behaviors like these may have made it reasonably safe for our ancestors to venture away from the trees in the first place. Throwing stones and using weapons were important additions to self- and group defense. There is also clear evidence that by about 800,000 years ago some hominins had controlled fire and built well-defined hearths. Most animals have an innate fear of fire and would be likely to have kept their distance from a campfire. The light from the*

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas Hobbes. "Hobbes believed that it was human nature to be in a state of war, where every person was in a permanent state of conflict with every other person for the limited resources available" (Stephen Olynyk, "Convenient Fictions: A Comparison and Critical Analysis of Hobbes' and Locke's Social Contract Theories", The Western Australian Jurist Vol. 1, 2010 132). \* Hobbes stated that existence was "*bellum omnium contra omnes*".

<sup>5</sup>Jean J Rousseau. "One day in 1749, at age 37, while walking to the Bastille to see his imprisoned friend, the major Enlightenment-era philosopher, Diderot, Rousseau saw an ad for an essay contest, hosted by the Academy of Dijon, asking a simple question: has science made us better or worse, more or less moral? As Rousseau tells it, he fell asleep in the park, had a vision, awoke in tears, and started to write his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. He won the contest, instantly rose to fame, and forever changed the way humans see what it means to be human. His basic thesis: man is naturally good, and anything that is not natural has corrupted us from this natural state." <[uidaho.edu/engl\\_258/Lecture%20Notes/man\\_is\\_naturally\\_good.htm?ref=stanfordreview.org](http://uidaho.edu/engl_258/Lecture%20Notes/man_is_naturally_good.htm?ref=stanfordreview.org)>

<sup>6</sup>Smithsonian's Human Origins,

<[https://humanorigins.si.edu/sites/default/files/HO\\_044\\_055\\_CHAP\\_3.pdf](https://humanorigins.si.edu/sites/default/files/HO_044_055_CHAP_3.pdf)>

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*campfire would also have helped our ancestors avoid surprise attacks. Between 800,000 and 400,000 years ago, when we see strong evidence for building both shelters and hearths, the level of human social cooperation had reached a crucial milestone."*<sup>7</sup>

But at least in ancient human times, the struggle for existence must have often been a primary feature of primitive human life in response to the many threats to their existence. While within a particular small human group there may well have been a measure of cooperative conduct, as against other people outside the group and against all other threats, organic or otherwise, there would no doubt have been a struggle to survive, often against the other. This struggle must have depended in large measure on human physical capacity, even with such limited defences and other innovative means of support. It may well have extended in some cases to struggles between particular primitive tribal peoples against other such peoples, or against other hominids, sufficient to be described as a survival of the fittest. It has been suggested that this could have included engaging in war, killing and shedding of blood, burning and pillaging the homes of each other and living in conditions of the utmost debasement and immorality, reducing them to being lower and more brutal than animals<sup>8</sup>

In animals, by way of comparison, self-preservation is essentially the process that prevents them from being harmed or killed and is generally considered a basic instinct of animals, whether inherent or learned. This appears to override other instincts, at least when threatened. The animal naturally seeks to maximize the use its physical capacities to survive and reproduce, although examples of cooperation do exist at least among particular species. Consequently, in nature in the wild, it can be argued that animals are predominantly governed by the imperative of the survival of the fittest.

As human societal development advanced beyond the primitive stages, extending to settled societies, it would seem that the struggle for survival may have sometimes been modified somewhat within those societies to be rather less confrontational and aggressive. Settled societies would no doubt have

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Abdu'l-Baha, talk recorded in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (7 November 1912 at Washington DC), Baha'i Publishing Trust, 400..The seriously violent conduct of some more modern leaders and combatants might perhaps also warrant this same description.

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developed rules to control, to some extent at least, aggressive or dominating conduct within those societies. External threats to the survival of those societies may have become of more concern rather than threats within the same society. This is to some extent reflected in the Old Testament. Thus the concept of an eye for an eye is set out in Leviticus<sup>9</sup>, but more in terms of a punishment for the taking of another life. The many battles and conflicts that are described in the Old Testament, some said to be with Divine endorsement, indicate a lengthy struggle for existence on the part of the Israelites against external threats and challenges.

Perhaps the New Testament reflects a different approach within societies. The new teaching in the Gospels is to turn the other cheek in the face of violence<sup>10</sup> and a rejection of idea of eye for an eye, with a command to love thine enemy<sup>11</sup>. This can be seen by some as a refutation of the concept of the survival of the fittest. The subsequent Christian history has, it can be said, not always conformed to this new teaching.

### **The enunciation of the concept of 'Survival of the Fittest'**

When we look at the brutality and competitiveness of much of human history, it does seem to support the view that humans were frequently governed by self-interest and the quest for personal survival. This was particularly so at least where the interests and survival of one group, tribe or nation were pitted against another. In this sense, it might have seemed that there was not a great deal of difference between the approaches of the people and nations involved in the struggle for life and that of the animals in this regard<sup>12</sup>. Warfare and violence

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<sup>9</sup>Old Testament, Leviticus 24:17-22. A similar approach is taken in the Holy Quran 5:45.

<sup>10</sup>*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well."* (New Testament, St Matthew 5:38-40)

<sup>11</sup>New Testament, St Matthew 5:43-48.

<sup>12</sup>Although animals are generally only aggressive when they have a need to be as a matter of survival. Some humans have shown a propensity for aggression and self interested actions even where there is no need for it. Abdu'l-Baha wrote: *"Ferocity has characterized men even more than animals. The lion, tiger, bear and wolf are ferocious because of their needs. Unless they are fierce, cruel and unrelenting, they will die of starvation. The lion cannot graze; its teeth are fitted only for food of flesh. This is also true of other wild animals. Ferocity is natural to them as their means of subsistence; but human ferocity proceeds from selfishness, greed and oppression. It springs from no*

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are part of the historical record. Humans are still quite capable, even today, of using physical force or other competitive means to protect their own perceived self interests, hopefully in the domestic situation mitigated by the controls of the domestic law and law enforcement. That capacity is even more obvious in the ongoing competition and confrontation between different empires and nations, absent any effective controls at international law. The evidences of a long history of ongoing violent human conflict in the world makes this obvious, still common today.

Some commentators might consider that the older religions did sometimes provide some semblance of restraint in the actions and responses of people and nations in terms of a more moralistic and less competitive or confrontational approach. But then the history of disagreement and violence between and against different religions and sects and their adherents, and the capacity of people and nations to ignore or reinterpret their own religious restraints, does not allow this view to be taken too far. Most religious people historically would probably never have questioned the view that life was inherently and primarily a struggle to survive, both individually and as part of society. Historically it was not labelled as "survival of the fittest" by name, but it did seem to often exhibit the characteristics of that approach even if not named as such.

In terms of nomenclature, the fact is that the concept of the "survival of the fittest", as a term of use, was not expressly enunciated as such until in the last few centuries. The phrase originated with the philosopher Herbert Spencer, as indicated in the following quote

*"The phrase 'survival of the fittest' is often incorrectly attributed to Darwin. In fact, it was coined by the philosopher Herbert Spencer in response to reading "Origin of Species" five years after the first edition was published. Alfred Russel Wallace, whose own theory about the mechanics of evolution was almost identical to Darwin's, wrote to Darwin in 1866 with a lengthy criticism of Darwin's term 'natural selection' and pleaded with him to minimise confusion by adopting 'Survival of the fittest'. Darwin introduced the phrase in a few places in his works from 5th edition of Origin in 1869. However, he never*

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*natural necessity."* ('Abdu'l-Baha, talk recorded in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (6 May 1912 at Cleveland, Ohio), 103)

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*abandoned the term 'natural selection' and only saw 'survival of the fittest' as a synonym or auxiliary phrase to help make his meaning clear to his readers."*<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting the influence of Malthus on the limits to population increases, Darwin wrote in the *Origin of the Species*:

*"A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage. Although some species may be now increasing, more or less rapidly, in numbers, all cannot do so, for the world would not hold them."*<sup>14</sup>

Darwin could recognise what he saw to be the elevated station of the human being, but still felt that they were constrained by their basic natural instincts:

*"Man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system- with all these exalted powers- Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin."*<sup>15</sup>

As a result, some have thought that Darwin applied the full force of the survival of the fittest to the human being as well as to animals, but this may be a

<sup>13</sup><https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/commentary/survival-fittest>

<sup>14</sup><http://www.literaturepage.com/read/darwin-origin-of-species-66.html>

<sup>15</sup>Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871) Ch. XXI.

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misrepresentation<sup>16</sup>. It is said that Darwin did not believe that humans were violent and competitive in their natural state.

Elsewhere the doctrine has been extended by some writers to the human being on the basis that there is no difference between that human being and the animal. In fact the view was promulgated that the human being was just another evolved animal. Thus Thomas Huxley believed that humans were just another animal descended from the apes. He wrote:

*"I have endeavoured to show that no absolute structural line of demarcation, wider than that between the animals which immediately succeed us in the scale, can be drawn between the animal world and ourselves; and I may add the expression of my belief that the attempt to draw a physical distinction is equally futile, and that even the highest faculties of feeling and of intellect begin to germinate in lower forms of life."*<sup>17</sup>

Herbert Spencer was another advocate of the idea of the survival of the fittest. Of Darwin, Spencer wrote: *"This survival of the fittest, which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called 'natural selection', or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life."*<sup>18</sup>

Commenting on Spencer it was stated:

*"Spencer decried attempts to equalize society's playing field. It would be counterproductive, he felt, for the "fit" to feel any obligation toward the "unfit". In dense tomes that sold hundreds of thousands of copies, he said of the poor that 'the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better'"*<sup>19</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century enunciation of this concept by Spencer and others was not expressed to be as a new development in human relations; rather it was using the phrase in a descriptive sense to describe the alleged nature of past human

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<sup>16</sup>Keltner stated "We so often assume both in the scientific community, and in our culture at large, that Darwin thought humans were violent and competitive and self-interested in their natural state. That is a misrepresentation of what Darwin actually believed, and where the evolutionary study of human goodness is going." - in conversation with David Disalvo, *Forget Survival of the Fittest: It Is Kindness That Counts*, <<https://www.dailygood.org/story/579/kindness-emotions-david-disalvo>>

<sup>17</sup>T Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature*, (1863) Ch.2, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup>Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology* (1864)

<sup>19</sup>Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, Souvenir Press, (2009),28.

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nature and relations, a characteristic that was said to be a primary motivation in human affairs. It was said to be a self interested and aggressive characteristic. And as an alleged inherent motivation, it can be deduced that the writers were asserting a continuation of that characteristic into the future of humanity, with little or no hope of a change in the future to a more peaceful, compassionate, cooperative, unifying approach. Humanity, they seemed to be saying, is destined for ever more to be stuck with a struggle for survival, for the benefit of the one over and at the expense of the other.

Speaking of this concept, Esslemont wrote:

*"During the past century scientists have devoted an immense amount of study to the struggle for existence in the plant and animal world, and, amid the perplexities of social life, many have turned for guidance to the principles which have been found to hold good in the lower world of nature. In this way they have come to regard rivalry and conflict as necessities of life, and the ruthless killing out of the weaker members of society as a legitimate or even necessary means of improving the race."*<sup>20</sup>

But some evolutionary scientists since Darwin have taken the view that humans are not entirely controlled by the self-interested concept of survival of the fittest and are capable, for example, of altruistic behaviour. Thus de Beer wrote:

*"From earliest human times, the survival value of altruistic behaviour has been enhanced because of the prolongation of childhood and the consolidation of the family that have characterized the evolution of Man. The size of the unit within which altruistic behaviour conferred survival-value has grown progressively larger, but fitfully, as history and anthropology have shown, from the family to the clan, the tribe and the nation. In this manner, ethical standards of conduct and morality have arisen which can be seen to develop in individuals and have been seen to evolve in societies..... With the development of man's higher mental faculties, the pooling of experience by speech-communication and its storage in memory, conscious choice and purposiveness became factors in evolution. Hence his subsequent psycho-social evolution has been of a nature different from that of other organisms, because it is no longer governed solely by natural selection and therefore involved purposes outside the scope of natural selection".*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> J E Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, (1923), Baha'i Publishing Trust, 147.

<sup>21</sup> Gavin de Beer, *A Handbook on Evolution*, Trustees of the British Museum, 1970, 21.

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## **Consequences of theories of Evolution and Survival of the Fittest**

While Darwin did not abandon all notions of a Deity, the consequences of his theory on the beliefs and practices of the wider society, in conjunction with advances in science generally, have been profound. There has been a significant rise in what might be described as a philosophy of scientific materialism, not dependent on religion or on a theistic view of existence. The widespread dispersion of the philosophy expressly in name as the "survival of the fittest" would appear to have had an influence on many peoples in giving support to their views and in affecting their actions. Such views have often been based on strong prejudices such as to race, religion, ethnicity, etc., and have sometimes lead to violence. The struggle for existence may now be sometimes emphasised by some as a matter of assumed basic principle that characterises human life and society. This in turn has had a profound influence on the nature of society and the thinking of individuals within it, sometimes described as a "dog-eat-dog" attitude. Together with the spread of scientific materialism and the decline in organised religion, the human being came to be increasingly seen as just another animal, albeit a biologically advanced animal, and subject to much the same physical conditions and actions as an animal. One critical commentator wrote:

*"A hideous revolution took place in the sciences and in our culture during the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, which had the aim of remaking the self-conception of the human species from that of a cognitive and creative being made in the image of the Creator, to that of an instinct-driven ape-like creature. This hideous cultural and scientific revolution has been so successful, that while we live in a world of potentially unlimited scientific progress, our descent into a totally bestial view of man has created both an inability to realize this potential, and with it an existential crisis for the human race."*<sup>22</sup>

But is there an opposite view to that of humans being basically competitive and self interested, even though the latter view still commands a lot of support? To a large extent it can be argued that modern society, particularly on the capitalist model, which emphasises the rights of the individual to a substantial degree of freedom, largely unimpeded by the state, is based on the survival of the fittest

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Glumaz, *The Hideous Revolution: The British Malthusian*,  
<[http://www.literaturepage.com/read/darwin-origin-of-species-66.html#google\\_vignette](http://www.literaturepage.com/read/darwin-origin-of-species-66.html#google_vignette)>

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view. Competition may be seen by some as necessary for the progress and wellbeing of society. Carnegie wrote:

*"The price which society pays for the law of competition, like the price it pays for cheap comforts and luxuries, is great; but the advantages of this law are also greater still than its cost / for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train. But, whether the law be benign or not, we must say of it: It is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department."*<sup>23</sup>

Potentially such an approach, whilst perhaps offering the potential for more efficient results in the purely material terms of production and overall wealth, can open the door to all kind of unjust results if selectively or ruthlessly applied. Whilst wealth is not bad per se, many industrialists, economists, politicians and others, for example, appear to have been influenced by the concept of survival of the fittest in a belief in the centrality of a prosperous material economy based on competition and substantial inequality<sup>24</sup>. Commonly, this approach has often been associated with a resultant great disparities of wealth.

At the nation state level, the pursuit of the perceived self interests of the state are invariably given top priority in international relations, extending to fierce competition and in many cases to confrontation and war. The global society has as yet been unable to develop a global system that is capable of bringing a just and lasting peace between nations. Nation states still claim and often act as though they have absolute rights of sovereignty within their own territories and areas of influence and over their own and sometimes other peoples, even with the increasing levels of global inter dependence. Their perceived interests can be aggressively sought and applied. The result is a great deal of global inequity and injustice.

The real danger is that the concept of survival of the fittest may be taken to an extreme level, both in relation to the individual and at the nation state level. This has already happened, as witness the doctrines of aggressive racial and

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth*, No. CCCXCI, (June, 1889). To be fair, Carnegie was a great benefactor with his wealth.

<sup>24</sup> The legislatures in many countries have found it necessary to legislatively intervene to outlaw the worst excesses of the free market in relation to such things as monopolies and combines, restrictive and dishonest trade practices, etc.

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national superiority with National Socialism, and in events and practices such as gross exploitation of workers, of the abuse of colonial subjects and of minorities, and in slavery, genocide and other gross human rights abuses. The application of eugenics is another example. If science is left unchallenged, the concept can be expressed in such developments between nation states as in the development of weapons of mass destruction and other abusive and destructive methods. Morality and ethics can be devalued in the struggle for survival under such a philosophy, whilst undesirable conduct such as crime and corruption may well be given an opportunity to spread, the only fault being to be caught.

### **Limits to the Survival of the Fittest**

Historically, there has often been thought given in recorded history to the possibility of limits to human selfish, competitive, or aggressive behaviour.

Thus Aristotle contended that human beings are not naturally good but amoral, although they can be led to be good in the society through education.

The great religions of antiquity asserted that certain standards of moral conduct were necessary for the good of society. Reference has already been made to the teachings of the New Testament. Other religions had similar principles, such as in the Golden rule of "do unto others...etc." Most, if not all, of the world's religions promote altruism as a very important moral value. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, and Sikhism, etc., place particular emphasis on altruistic morality<sup>25</sup>. It was generally assumed in the religious context that morally worthy behaviour such as cooperation and altruism, the opposite of the survival of the fittest approach, could be learned through religious belief and association. This has led to theological debate within Christianity, for example, given the tension between the survival of the fittest concept as already discussed on the one hand, and the view taken from the New Testament teachings that the one supreme God cares for all the creation on the other hand, including for the downtrodden and disposed in society, those that might be considered unfit.

*"If Christians confess that God cares for the weak, how does that relate to*

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<sup>25</sup> Wikipedia, <[wikipedia.org/wiki/Altruism](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Altruism)>/

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*the Darwinian struggle for survival? Is caring for the weak, poor and oppressed merely a requisite corrective to guard against the excesses of the strong? Or is God's care for the weak the heart of the Christian faith – as suggested by the notion of the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology and by a concern for God's justice in the Confession of Belhar<sup>26</sup>? On this question there remain deep ecumenical divides...."<sup>27</sup>*

The tendency within some religious thought has been to either reinterpret the survival of the fittest concept, including by way of emphasising cooperation and altruism in human nature, or to reject the concept, at least in its more extreme and more abusive and exploitative forms. Moral principles may be invoked, it often being asserted that moral have a direct links to organised religion. The position is complex as it tends to be interconnected with the long debate between evolution and Divine creation. Some Christians that have considered the concept may reject it and argue that one should rely on faith and trust in the Divine, arguing that in that faith and trust the weak are protected. Some Christian sects may, on the other hand, have chosen not to approach the topic in any detail and to simply adopt an apocalyptic view of a future end to the earth and humanity due to its decadence, perhaps upon a miraculous return of their promised saviour, the chosen believers taking comfort in the belief that they will be taken up to a better place.

The place of cooperation and altruism in human nature and practice has received increasing recent attention in the literature. There is a now a body of literature on this topic. This is sometimes used to balance the view that humans are self interested and aggressive. In some cases it is seen that these features are not necessarily devoid of self interest<sup>28</sup>, as distinct from pure self sacrifice or altruism without any expectations. But at least the element of cooperation usually does not have the combination of domination or control to be found in the survival of the fittest, that is, unless there are ulterior motives. Cooperation

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<sup>26</sup>The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. It was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, now the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and formally adopted in 1986.

<sup>27</sup>Ernst M. Conradie, "The Christian faith and evolution: An evolving, unresolved debate", Verbum et Ecclesia 39(1), (June 2018)

<sup>28</sup>Eg: Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, (1984) Basic Books, Chapters 5 and 7; Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest*,(2004), George Ronald.

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and altruism are often seen as being connected to a moral/ethical position.

Kropotkin wrote:

*"And man is ...guided in his acts, not merely by love, which is always personal, or at the best tribal, but by the perception of his oneness with each human being. In the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions; and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support not mutual struggle -- has had the leading part. In its wide extension, even at the present time, we also see the best guarantee of a still loftier evolution of our race. "*<sup>29</sup>

Martin Luther King took a moral standpoint in that he saw the concept of survival of the fittest as being undermined. He stated:

*"Midnight is the hour when men desperately seek to obey the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught." According to the ethic of midnight, the cardinal sin is to be caught and the cardinal virtue is to get by. It is all right to lie, but one must lie with real finesse. It is all right to steal, if one is so dignified that, if caught, the charge becomes embezzlement, not robbery. It is permissible even to hate, if one so dresses his hating in the garments of love that hating appears to be loving. The Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest has been substituted by a philosophy of the survival of the slickest. This mentality has brought a tragic breakdown of moral standards, and the midnight of moral degeneration deepens. "*<sup>30</sup>

## **Religious Revision**

But in some religious teachings there is an express total rejection of the value of the concept of survival of the fittest in its alleged inherent application to human beings. This is most pronounced in the teachings of the Baha'i Faith. This is worth particular consideration, as it is the only independent religion in which its sacred writings specifically deal with this topic by name.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, (1902)

<sup>30</sup>Martin Luther King, speech "A Knock at Midnight" (14 September 1958)

<sup>31</sup>Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), the eldest son of the Founder/Prophet of the Faith, Baha'u'llah, and whose writings are regarded as part of the corpus of the Baha'i sacred writings, specifically uses the term "survival of the fittest" in the early 20th century – see *Divine Philosophy* (1918), 12. He also mentioned the topic by name in some of His talks, reproduced in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Baha'i Publishing Trust (8 October 1912 at Leland Stanford Junior University Palo Alto, California) at 353, and (7 November 1912, talk at Home of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur J. Parsons, Washington, D.C.), at 400.

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Abdu'l-Baha noted in a letter that the present organisation of the planet into separate nations lies at the base of the problem. He stated:

*"..All the nations are thinking of how to advance their own interests while working against the best interests of other nations. They desire their own personal advantage while seeking to undermine affairs in other countries. They call this the "struggle for survival" (tanẓu'-ibaq'), and assert that it is innate to human nature. But this is a grievous error; nay, there is no error greater than this. Gracious God! Even in the animal kingdom cooperation and mutual assistance for survival are observed among some species, especially in the case of danger to the whole group. ... Insofar as animals display such noble sentiments, how much more should man, who is the noblest of creatures; and how much more fitting it is in particular that, in view of the divine teachings and heavenly ordinances, man should be obliged to attain this excellence.*

*In the estimation of God, distinctions of race, divisions of borders, favoring one people over another, and all individual limitations are unworthy and rejected. All the prophets of God were sent down and all the sacred books were revealed for the purpose of assisting man to achieve this heavenly grace and this divine virtue. All the divine teachings can be summarized as this: that these thoughts singling out advantages to one group may be banished from our midst, that human character may be improved, that equality and fellowship may be established amongst all mankind, until every individual is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of his fellowman. This is the divine foundation. This is the law come down from heaven. Such a firm foundation cannot be impregnated into human consciousness save by one universal and all-pervasive power, for every other power is helpless except for the power of the Holy Spirit. The outpourings of the Holy Spirit are such that they can transform man, imbuing him with all the virtues, bestowing upon him the second birth, baptizing him with the fire of the love of God, which is love for all created things, and quickening him with the water of eternal life, and the Holy Spirit itself."*<sup>32</sup>

But as already noted, the concept of the survival of the fittest has at its root the idea that humans are inherently selfish and aggressive, both individually and in

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<sup>32</sup>Letter by Abdu'l-Baha, provisional translation by Keven Brown, Lawh-i-Tanẓu'-ibaq, cited in *Evolution & Baha'i Belief*, (2001) Kalimat Press, at 112-114.

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society. Writing of this, the Universal House of Justice, the ruling body of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

*"....aparalyzing contradiction has developed in human affairs. On the one hand, people of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but their longing for peace and harmony, for an end to the harrowing apprehensions tormenting their daily lives. On the other, uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive and thus incapable of erecting a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on co-operation and reciprocity."*<sup>33</sup>

In the Baha'i Faith, the philosophy that says that humans are incapable of looking beyond their own selfishness is rejected, to be replaced by a new, more spiritual approach to human society, one that advocates a new commitment to a much more principled, spiritually guided and less self-centred orientation in life. This is seen as being a matter of free choice for each individual with appropriate education. In this regard, humans are perceived as having the spiritual and intellectual capacity to make such a choice between the two approaches, rather than being inherently tied to the one self-centered approach. To achieve that, right education with a global basis is required.

The Baha'i Writings accept that the nature of animals is largely based on the survival for existence. But it teaches that human beings are not just animals; rather they have certain intellectual and spiritual qualities that differentiate them from animals. In this sense nature is seen as being inherently defective due to the struggle for life, and that it is the task facing humans to use their God-given gifts to rise above this struggle. The Writings envisage the human being as essentially being social beings and as having, with the right education, guidance and inspiration, special abilities and spiritual capacities to develop their character and conduct over time so as to transcend this struggle. They postulate that the thinking based on this concept of survival of the fittest, whereby one person must struggle against other persons in order to survive, is not inherent to the human condition but is the result of inculcation through life experiences and inadequate education, and can be changed by right education. The remedy, it argues, lies in a spiritual education, an education that postulates changes in thinking and practices to emphasize our common spiritual links as one

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<sup>33</sup> Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, (1985) Baha'i Publishing Trust.

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interdependent human race on one small planetary homeland. As a corollary, the Writings unequivocally teach the need for humanity to acquire and practice the Divine virtues of perfection as revealed by the Founder/Manifestations of the great religions in order to create a peaceful, united and fair society. The acquisition by humanity of these virtues is seen as a fundamental aspect of the Revelation of their Founder Baha'u'llah<sup>34</sup>,

Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

*"Some animals are isolated and lead a separate existence away from their kind. But this is impossible for man. In his life and being cooperation and association are essential. Through association and meeting we find happiness and development, individual and collective."*<sup>35</sup>

*"The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity. The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity."*<sup>36</sup>

And to achieve this, the Writings assert the need for a new, globally united society free of the limitations imposed by the divisions of the planet into separate, competing nation-states. By humanity spiritually evolving and working cooperatively together in the global society as one united human race in this way, it is seen as the way forward for a divided humanity over time to heal the problems plaguing a very divided global society as it exists at present. The aim and purpose in this life is argued to be to achieve a unity in human diversity on a global basis.

It should immediately be stated that this is not to advocate some form of communistic approach to society based on the theoretical equality of every person in a compulsory global collective. Nor is it to advocate a purely materialistic approach to the issue. The individual is seen in Baha'i as having a critical role in society in order to freely make decisions as to spiritual beliefs and principles and to take responsibility therefore, to apply the Divine virtues including by way of service to others, to exercise individual initiative and free

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<sup>34</sup>Baha'u'llah (1819 – 1892) is regarded by Baha'is as the Manifestation of God for this age and the Promised One of all the great religions.

<sup>35</sup>Abdu'l-Bahá, talk recorded in *"The Promulgation of Universal Peace"*, Baha'i Publishing Trust (20 April 1912 at Washington DC), 35.

<sup>36</sup>Abdu'l-Bahá, talk recorded in *"The Promulgation of Universal Peace"*, Baha'i Publishing Trust (25 September 1912 at Denver, Colorado), 338.

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choices, to acquire an education, etc. At the same time the individual is encouraged to act in consultation and to seek cooperation and unity, to act with justice and moderation and be of useful service to humanity. Charity and sharing are endorsed. There has to be, on this view, a balance between the material and the spiritual to achieve this. A purely materialistic philosophy will not suffice. It is said that humanity needs to move away from a narrow view of individuals as profit-maximizing to a broader view of material and spiritual prosperity, expressed for example in community building projects and undertakings that bring people together. Such efforts should provide insight into how service to one's fellow human beings can foster economic and other relationships based on cooperation rather than competition, and service to others rather than narrow self-interest."<sup>37</sup>

The Universal House of Justice, the ruling body of the Baha'i Faith, spoke of the need for a peaceful, united world order in which all prejudices and forms of discrimination, including those that are generated by the concept of the survival of the fittest, are replaced by a new spiritual unity. It added:

*"The primary question to be resolved is how the present world, with its entrenched pattern of conflict, can change to a world in which harmony and co-operation will prevail.*

*World order can be founded only on an unshakeable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, recognize only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. Recognition of this truth requires abandonment of prejudice--prejudice of every kind--race, class, colour, creed, nation, sex, degree of material civilization, everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others."*<sup>38</sup>

Speaking of the rejection of any concept of superiority amongst different humans, Esslemont wrote:

*"The Bahá'í doctrine of the unity of mankind strikes at the root of another cause of war, namely, racial prejudice. Certain races have assumed themselves to be superior to others and have taken for granted, on the principle of "survival of*

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<sup>37</sup>India: Transforming economic structures to build a more caring society, (8 January, 2025), <<https://news.bahai.org/story/1775/>>

<sup>38</sup>Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (1985) Baha'i Publishing Trust, 28

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*the fittest," that this superiority gives them the right to exploit for their own advantage, or even to exterminate, weaker races.*

*Many of the blackest pages in the world's history are examples of the pitiless application of this principle. According to the Bahá'í view people of every race are of equal value in the sight of God. All have wonderful innate capacities which only require suitable education for their development, and each can play a part, which, instead of impoverishing, will enrich and complete the life of all the other members of the body of humanity."*<sup>39</sup>

The aim then of the Faith is to create a human brotherhood and sisterhood comprising all humanity under the one supreme Deity of all. Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

*"Human brotherhood is, likewise, as clear and evident as the sun, for all are servants of one God, belong to one humankind, inhabit the same globe, are sheltered beneath the overshadowing dome of heaven and submerged in the sea of divine mercy. Human brotherhood and dependence exist because mutual helpfulness and cooperation are the two necessary principles underlying human welfare. This is the physical relationship of mankind.*

*There is another brotherhood -- the spiritual -- which is higher, holier and superior to all others. It is heavenly; it emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit and the effulgence of merciful attributes; it is founded upon spiritual susceptibilities. This brotherhood is established by the Manifestations of the Holy One."*<sup>40</sup>

Thus if we are to achieve a just and peaceful global society and put an end to the wars and conflicts that plague the planet, it is argued that there has to be a new, uniting standard universally applied in human society. It is essentially a spiritual approach that involves the recasting of that society and the individuals within it based on the new standard of the recognition of the oneness of humanity under the one supreme Deity of all. In such a society, the concept of

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<sup>39</sup>J E Esslemont, *Bahá'u'llah and the New Era*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, (1923), 150. He was an early Baha'i.

<sup>40</sup>Abdu'l-Baha, talk recorded in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, (28 May 1912 at New York), 150.

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the survival of the fittest, as interpreted in a materialistic, self interested manner, is seen as not being acceptable.

On this view being advanced, the standard cannot be that of the animal. On the Baha'i view, it must be the standard advanced by the Founders of the great religions, the Divine Manifestations or Prophets. This standard is the very antithesis of those characterized by the animal struggle for self-preservation and survival, and humans must choose between the two contrasting approaches, for they cannot be reconciled. The ruling concept in a fair global society can no longer be survival of the fittest. In its place, the principles of unity, concord and compassion must be elevated to a new pinnacle as taught by those Prophets. Violence and force, constraint and oppression, must one and all be condemned. Cooperation must receive a new emphasis in the place of competition. Individual initiative and excellence would still have a place, but tempered by the obligation to be of service and to act in the best interests of humanity.

**Comments in response**

Of course implementation of the Baha'i approach amounts to a huge challenge, not to be achieved even in the short term. For many it may seem to be totally beyond practical achievement, given the fractured nature of present world society. Many people may not be able to conceive of a global society that transcends the divisions and prejudices of that society at present, given the frailties of human nature. That view is made even more compelling by the predominantly materialistic approach of many people to life, devoid of any spiritual content. And given the many divisions existing among religions and sects, even those who claim to have strong religious or spiritual beliefs may not be able to surmount the thinking that prevails against a more universalistic and less sectarian approach to the future.

It can be argued that both the materialistic and the religious or spiritual perspectives are strongly influenced by the prejudices and divisions that presently influence or control human thinking. Thus the materialist may simply accept that human society is irretrievably and permanently burdened with a world of divided and contending nation states, each of which lays the emphasis on its own materialistic wellbeing and in which the individual members of each place the emphasis on their own materialistic well being. Any radical change in the nature of the global society could be seen as a threat to their present priorities. And many of those of areligious or spiritual inclination may well be content to preserve and defend the fractured or sectarian nature of their own religious or spiritual connections and their favoured ideas, hatreds, dogmas and

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traditions and be opposed to any concept of a comprehensive spiritual reconciliation in the wider interests of all humanity, even in the form of a new Divine revelation.

This is not to diminish the extent of the challenge posed by the suggested creation of a new and much fairer and more united global society in which the concept of the survival of the fittest has a much reduced influence. Of course the challenge to achieve this is immense. But then it can be argued that humanity in its present very divided state is now facing unprecedented threats to its proper functioning and long term survival. The threats are many, are serious and are increasingly global in nature, arguably only capable of being effectively addressed on a global, cooperative basis. Both communism and capitalism are now often not seen as having all the right answers. The concept of survival of the fittest, as applied in the present very divisive system of international relations, sometimes resulting in mass violence, may increasingly be recognised as being unsustainable. In an increasingly globalised world, there may be some concern and perhaps even pressure to find new solutions for the benefit of all humanity and for the planet as a whole. There is at the same time an increasing interest among many in spiritual solutions. In this scenario, the prospect of enormous trials and calamities arising to drastically disrupt the present global order, with resultant moves to replace it with a fairer and more harmonious global system, cannot be dismissed. Radical change usually comes with great trials and challenges.

When Bahá'u'lláh first proclaimed some decades ago, *"This is the hour of the coming together of all the races and nations and classes. This is the hour of unity among the sons of men,"* the prophecy was a far fetched ideal to the world of jealous politics and cultural isolation which received it. But it can be argued that the unity of humanity today is no mere social ideal. Arguably human secular and religious disunity and strife has (today) made it a social necessity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Baha'i World, in *Social Basis of World Unity*, 21 April 1946,  
<<https://bahaiworld.bahai.org/library/social-basis-of-world-unity/>>.

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