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BOOK REVIEW

Mikhail Sergeev, *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá'í Faith*. Leiden - Boston: Brill | Rodopi, 2015.

The author of this volume, a professor of religion and philosophy, has set himself an ambitious goal: to provide a comprehensive analysis of a pattern that he has observed in the lifetime of organized religions. This pattern is what Sergeev calls his "theory of religious cycles," as he concludes that all the major religions go through a distinct set of cycles or phases: formative, orthodox, classical, reformist, critical, and post-critical. The author argues – convincingly, in this reviewer's opinion – that traditional religions including Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, go through an essentially identical process, moving through all six stages over their long periods of evolution.

In Sergeev's view, a religion moves through these phases because of two types of developmental crises. The first is what he calls "structural crises," noting that these are crises that "challenge sacred tradition" and are "usually resolved by the appearance of new branches or divisions within the existing religions" (8). This leads to what is conventionally termed "denominations" in a particular religion, such as Catholic and Protestant Christianities. The second type is "systemic crises" – these set a religion into a pattern of change because "the foundation of the system itself" is challenged. This can lead, argues the author, to new religions, with Christianity arising from Judaism, Buddhism and Jainism from Hinduism, and the Bahá'í Faith from Islam.

The book does not present these crises as simply arising internally, but rather places them in the context of intellectual culture. Thus, for example, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century created the systemic crisis for the Christian faith. The presentation of this model of religious cycles occupies the first part of the book. The author is careful and systematic in both explaining and delimiting this model: he deals only with religions that are built upon written scriptures. This is a key point, because the author argues that such scriptures are a "semantic system" that shifts or evolves through time, particularly through the process of interpretation. The texts in these religions the author classifies as their "revelatory" elements, and thus they are sacred, even with the passage of time. However, the "interpretive elements" change, and thus there is a shifting interchange between the "sacred scriptures" and the "sacred traditions", since the latter is all about interpretation, practice, and so on, and thus subject to social and other forces.

This model is both historically accurate, and, in this reviewer's view, powerful in its explanatory ability. Too often the view as to the rise and

fall of religions is broken up into two simplistic paths: religions arise in "primitive" societies because of a lack of intellectual or technological sophistication, and then further spread because the belief systems provide methods of social control or align themselves with existing powers (e.g., Catholicism and the Roman Empire). In turn, religions are said to fall because of a general cultural decadence, creeping atheism, or some of kind Nietzschean catastrophe. In this book, Sergeev is much more thorough in describing what actually happens to religions, and notes that even the crises that belief systems encounter are events that have both very particular conditions and consequences. The graphs of the cyclical phases and the tables of religions and their belief systems are a very useful component to this book, and they help convince the reader as to the basic soundness of Sergeev's model, as well as demonstrate its clarity.

The book is divided into two main parts, but really there are three key sections here. First, the author presents what this reviewer finds most compelling, which is the model of religious cycles as a whole, and then how it plays out in Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. For many readers, the section on the splits in the Islamic faith will be very enlightening in terms of understanding a religion currently in the midst of a particularly turbulent phase of the cyclical model. But the author makes clear through his parallel structure here that all of these religions pass through these phases, even if those phases occur at different times. The second key section of this book is entitled "The Project of Modernity"; it describes at length both a proper definition of the term, and then how the "absolutization of reason that characterizes the spirit of European Enlightenment runs parallel to skepticism toward organized religion" (42). This, of course, sets up a major change – as the author writes: "[T]he project of the Enlightenment initiated the systemic crisis of the Christian faith and spirituality in general" (52).

At the end of this second section, the author alludes to where he is going with his argument, and a reader might wish for more here. Sergeev states that this kind of

> crisis could be overcome only by the rise of new religious systems with their own, independent revelatory texts. If my theory is correct, then a post-modern religion must exist that responds to the challenge and has the potential to resolve the crisis (52).

One would like to know more about this term – "post-modern religion" – in terms of a precise definition. Sergeev goes on to say the following:

> In contrast to pre-modern religions, religious systems that were established after the Enlightenment have the advantage of addressing modern political and social issues in their scriptural texts, thus erecting a new absolute foundation that supersedes modernity. It is among those religious traditions that we should look for a possible post-modern religion. . . A careful study of their doctrines led me to believe that the best match for my theory would be the Bahá'í Faith, to the discussion of which we now proceed (53).

The presentation of the cyclical model and its application to the major world religions is sufficient for a very interesting book. However, the author then chooses to devote the final third part – actually, roughly half of the book – to examining the Bahá'í Faith. This may puzzle the average reader, since that faith is certainly less well known than Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Moreover, it is a relatively modern religion, and thus has not gone through all of the phases outlined above, particularly the crisis of scrutiny by Enlightenment rationalists. However, the author argues that Bahá'í has engaged Enlightenment ideas directly, and that it "is the only modern religious tradition" that addresses "contemporary social issues", doing so "by providing an alternative social and political vision that goes significantly beyond modernity" (60). This religion, then, serves as a kind of "test case" for the author's cyclical model, and he examines it through various perspectives, including modernity; the question of traditional religions versus the Bahá'í Faith; the organization of the religion itself; how the religion deals with dissent; and finally the Bahá'í idea of religion essentially serving as the foundation of the State.

That last point forms a rather lengthy section of the text. The author's purpose here is to take fundamental Bahá'í teachings and compare them with ideas and doctrines formulated in the Enlightenment. This connects with Sergeev's main theme of cyclical patterns in a religion's development in a particular sense. Modernity, the author notes, is characterized in the field of politics by the separation of religion and the state, and this concept has its origins in the Enlightenment. The Bahá'í Faith has a very particular position regarding religion and state, which thus merits this long analysis.

The author argues that the Bahá'í religion incorporates certain aspects of modernity, such as democratic elections. He also argues that the religion appears retrograde in other respects, such as its "repudiation of organized dissent". However, Sergeev concludes that despite apparently "regressive" tendencies, the religion has grappled with modernity in the

sense that the Bahá'í Faith has the ultimate progressive goal of assuring the "continuous progress of humankind" (104). In this sense, then, the extensive discussion of the Bahá'í Faith can be said to fit logically in this book, and the "Conclusions" section of the work attempts to tie all this together. Indeed, there the author asserts that the "most important conclusion of my analysis of religious evolution consists in the assertion that we cannot fully understand the events of twentieth-century history. . . without recourse to Bahá'u'lláh and Bahá'í thought" (105).

The final arguments raised some questions in the mind of the reviewer, although they certainly are presented reasonably clearly. Sergeev states that

> although some of the features of the Bahá'í worldview may seem like a step backward from the project of the Enlightenment, a systematic comparison between the two demonstrates the progressive nature of the first over the second . . . Bahá'í doctrines display spiritual depth, which is lacking in the Enlightenment ideology that relies purely on reason and external social reforms (117-18).

Perhaps – but one could argue that the Enlightenment project is not over, and that the period we are living in is actually an odd conflation of Enlightenment thinking (with secular reason being the current foundation of most Western countries' political systems, for example), modernism (the dominance of science and technology in our society), and postmodernism (our increasing cynicism and narcissism). In short, one could say that the "post-religious" phase has not had time to settle and present itself with a clear identity. In turn, this may mean that the "Bahá'í worldview" may in fact *not* be as "progressive" (to use the author's term) as some kind of thoughtful, rational modernity that will appear, and which will succeed in transcending both the rigidity of the Enlightenment and the despair of postmodernism. Also, it is not totally clear that Enlightenment thinking – or any system that is based on reason – will lack "spiritual depth". Buddhism, for example, is deeply spiritual but at the same time profoundly rational and pragmatic.

Sergeev seems to be arguing that the Bahá'í Faith is the "post-modern religion" that he has alluded to earlier. The reviewer was not completely convinced as to this claim, but readers may analyze the material for themselves, and see how all this fits with the author's cyclical model. In the "Postscript" of the book, Sergeev writes about the "potential" of the Bahá'í Faith, and explores the issue further.

Regardless, this is an extremely important book in understanding that religions change or evolve according to a precise system of phases.

Sergeev has argued clearly, too, that this evolution comes not from a simplistic "decline in faith", but from a highly complex series of interactions between texts, traditions, and believers, and the forces of modernity and cultural change.

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