
Reviews

M. Sergeev. *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Baha'i Faith*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015. — 161 p. Value Inquiry Book Series. Contemporary Russian Philosophy. Ed. by R. Ginsberg, L. Donskis. Vol. 284. ISBN: 978-90-04-30003-3; ISSN: 0929-8436.

In his book, Mikhail Sergeev puts forward and substantiates his theory of “religious cycles”, applying it to the whole history of humankind. Within it, a prominent place among religions is given to the Baha’i faith. Consequently, viewed from this angle, the book should also be seen as a large-scale and impartial study of this religion because the author is biased neither for nor against the Baha’i faith. He fits facts into a logical chain to prove his point. Sergeev should be given credit for the depth and thoroughness of his analysis as well as for his profound erudition. Nevertheless, even this approach, in the opinion of the present writer, does not prevent the author from having a certain “twist” which leads him to some fairly debatable conclusions. That applies, however, to only a limited number of issues without detracting from the main merits of the book.

According to the theory of “religious cycles”, in the course of its development and history, a religious system goes through six phases: formative, orthodox, classical, reformist, critical and post-critical. The early or formative phase in the evolution of religious system is characterized by the formation of its scriptural canon and the establishment of its sacred tradition. The orthodox phase, as the author puts it, “cements the traditional foundations of religion by fighting heretical movements and their alternative scriptural interpretations.” The classical phase reformulates sacred tradition by adding new interpretations to the canon. Reformists (who come into play at the “reformist phase”), on the contrary, purify tradition from the accumulated interpretations in order to get back to the core of sacred teachings and restore the original faith. During the critical stage a religion goes through two crises: structural and systemic. The latter can be overcome only by the introduction of new religious systems with their own scriptural texts. It is at this stage, according to the author, that mother-religions usually produce their offshoots in the form of new religious

systems or movements evolving into new religions. After the critical phase (at the post-critical phase) religious systems do not disappear from the historic scene but renew and reconfirm their foundations. As a result, age-old religions continue to exist alongside their younger counterparts by reorganizing their sacred tradition and restoring the authority of primary scriptures (pp. 7–8).

The theory described is, in the opinion of the present writer, interesting and well-founded. The author analyses the evolution of the five major religions: Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i faith, successively applying the model of religious cycles to each religion (p. 8). He convincingly proves the validity of his theory using sound arguments and making tenable conclusions.

Having proceeded on to religions which originated after the European Enlightenment, Sergeev dwells specifically on the Baha'i faith as the most representative example among those systems with regard to the theory of "religious cycles". He substantiates his choice, arguing that "it is the only independent modern religion with its own scriptures and tradition that have been evolving for a considerable amount of time — almost two centuries" (p. 10). The author exhibits profound knowledge of the Baha'i faith basing his analysis, as on other occasions, on a wide circle of different sources, which highlights his thorough approach to the subject. He gives a succinct and precise account of the Babi and Baha'i faiths dividing the corpus of the Baha'i writings into three main periods (p. 60). Touching on the Baha'i principle of "harmony between science and religion", Sergeev clarifies the distinctive features of scientific and religious truths (pp. 66–67). He makes a detailed analysis of the Baha'i administrative system and envisions possible lines for its future development. Though many observations and conclusions he makes sound reasonable, some do appear to the present writer highly disputable. For example, the author states that, in his opinion, the Baha'i administrative system looks similar in its approach to "organized dissent" to "the Soviet political system with its principle of democratic centralism", which combines "democratic elections of the governing bodies — the Soviet councils... with the unchallenged power given to those bodies to suppress opposition" (p. 91). In the opinion of the present writer, it could reasonably be contended that the apparent analogy between the two models becomes invalid as soon as we consider such a counterbalance as a genuine mechanism of appeal "from the bottom-up" against decisions by higher authorities, on the basis of a special procedure, which functions effectively in the Baha'i administrative system but was practically non-existent in the Soviet model (not to mention the possible negative consequences of any such attempt under the Soviet system).

Considering efforts "to fight dissent" in the course of history and indicating their futility, the author arrives at the conclusion that there are "only two ways to deal with organized dissent. One is to legitimize it; the other is to repudiate but never eradicate it. In both of these cases, the conflict would still be embedded in the social organization" (p. 92). However, in the opinion of the present writer, it is important to bear in mind that civil society at large can neither wholly consist of like-minded

people, nor can it even be guided by a set of entirely common values and moral principles. One should agree with the author that any attempt to impose “a uniform way of thinking” or one worldview on such a society would be not only futile but also detrimental to the progress of that society. It is, however, different in the case of a community of people united by a common religious faith who *consciously* and *voluntarily* make a choice in favor of a certain set of values (pertaining to a particular religion). Such people are by definition like-minded in principle, while the differences between them are purely individual and secondary. The Baha’i faith, as becomes clear from its writings (primary sources), does not impose its worldview on humanity. It offers it as an alternative model leaving it up to each individual to decide whether to accept or reject it. Besides, Baha’i writings emphasize that the cornerstone of Baha’i teachings is *unity in diversity* as opposed to “unity in uniformity”, while humanity is likened in those writings to a garden with different species and types of flowers co-existing in harmony. In other words, the Baha’i Faith puts forward a concept of a whole which instead of destroying the autonomy of its parts preserves it. The principle described is applied not only to human and international relationships but also to the Baha’i administrative system. In the latter, it is expressed in the form of such a mechanism as a clear separation of powers between administrative bodies functioning on all levels, a system of checks and balances and non-interference in the private life of the individual (except for cases affecting the life of the community as a whole) etc. The author correctly points out that “in traditional societies the rejection of opposition was often a sign of tyrannical government.” He goes on to say that “there are three main checks in the Bahá’í organizational system to prevent that from happening.” However, this system of checks and balances in its present form seems to him “somewhat vulnerable to abuse of power under the pretext of the protection of the faith from the dangers of dissent and division” (p. 94). In the opinion of the present writer, this conclusion ignores the fact that the whole of the Baha’i administrative system is built in such a way as to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of one individual or group. This factor minimizes the danger of abuse of power as the probability of such a development tends towards zero. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of a further evolution of the system with more counterbalances being added to it in the future, something which is admitted by the author himself (p. 94).

Comparing the Baha’i religion with the ideology of the European Enlightenment, the author states that “in dealing with organized dissent, and covenant-breaking as the most radical form of opposition, Bahá’ís stand, as they do on many other controversial issues, somewhere between modernity and traditional religions. They are not as tolerant as the adherents of the Enlightenment ideology that institutionalizes opposition. Nor do they crush it as harshly as the fervent religious leaders of the past. There are no anathemas or fatwas in the Bahá’í administrative responses to covenant-breaking” (p. 95). It might be contended that a comparison between the Baha’i faith and the Enlightenment ideology appears somewhat irrelevant, although not

entirely devoid of interest, from a purely theoretical standpoint. What makes this comparison a bit far-fetched is the fact that these two phenomena are quite different in nature, if not opposites. The Enlightenment was primarily based on an atheist worldview that was a natural reaction to medieval religious obscurantism, while the Baha'i faith is a *religion* which by definition cannot wholly resemble something that is its opposite (atheism). Moreover, the solutions to human problems that this religion offers are an alternative to an atheistic approach. As far as "organized opposition" is concerned, in a democratic civil society, its only goal is to gain political power. Viewed from this angle, it fully justifies its existence. It is for this goal that political parties come into being which reflect the interests of particular groups of the population as well as their aspirations in pursuit of political power. Despite all the advantages of this model compared with totalitarian and authoritarian systems, it cannot escape one deficiency, i.e., the situation where the group gaining power imposes its factional interests on the rest of society. This deficiency is only partly made good by such groups' replacing each other at the top. The Baha'i administrative system, on the contrary, is oriented toward the opposite goal, i.e., excluding the pursuit of power or a power struggle by individuals and groups as well as preventing such groups from imposing their interests on the whole community. Time will show how effective the model offered by the Baha'i faith will prove to be and whether it will succeed in achieving this goal, especially given the fact that this model is not static. It has been dynamically developing over the course of its history and is very likely to undergo further evolution in the future.

Sergeev envisages three possible lines of development of the "theocratic" tendencies in the Baha'i administrative system and considers the implementation of these models in the "world commonwealth of nations" that Baha'is view as the global level of the future super-state reflecting the worldwide unity of humankind (pp. 100–101). The first, according to the author, may resemble the power structure of a constitutional monarchy with the House of Justice (supreme elective administrative body on the national level) playing the role of the "monarch". In this scenario, the House of Justice may guide the civil authorities by providing recommendations on how Baha'i laws and ordinances could be translated into the civil legislative practices of the country. The government would then "enforce" those recommendations, given that the appointment of the prime minister of the state is endorsed by the House of Justice. The second model provides for a more direct participation of the Baha'i Houses of Justice in the process of civil legislature by applying the modern principle of the separation of power into religious and civil institutions, and creating mutual checks and balances between them. According to this model, the House of Justice would play a legislative role but have authority somewhat similar to the president of the United States. The parliament would pass new laws, which the House of Justice could either approve or veto. The third model allows for a higher concentration of power in the House of Justice by reducing civil government to its executive arm and practically absorbing it into this religious institution. This last

model seems to the author “the most problematic of the three” (p. 101). Although Sergeev’s reasoning is definitely not devoid of interest, this whole part of the book referring to a very distant future and, therefore, to quite an imaginary reality, is lacking one point which needs to be considered here. It could be reasonably contended, with regard to “theocracy”, that theocracies, properly speaking, have never existed, at least in the context of Abrahamic religions. What historians and political scientists often refer to as “theocracies” in the past and present are not theocracies, but rather clerical regimes or clerical government models (providing a dominant role for the clergy in the government and society). In societies, where the official or dominant religion has clergy, the latter represent a social class or stratum of their own. Consequently, a state based on such a religious organization and claiming to be “theocratic” inevitably becomes a clerical state, because once a conflation of church (or any other religious organization with the clergy at the top) and state occurs, the clergy become the ruling class of such a state (concentrating political power in their hands). This was the case with medieval Europe during the dominion of the Catholic Church there, and it is equally the case with modern countries under *Sharia* (Islamic) law. While the application of the term “theocratic” to this system of government creates confusion and leads to the substitution of one notion (“theocratic”) for another (“clerical”), projecting such a pseudo-theocratic model onto the Baha’i administrative system is irrelevant, given the fact that there are no clergy in the Baha’i religion who could concentrate power in their hands as a social class or stratum “in the name of religion”. Based on this distinction, it would be proper to conclude that, while there are obvious democratic and theocratic tendencies in the Baha’i administrative system, clerical or authoritarian tendencies do not exist in it (because at no level of its functioning is solitary decision-making practiced). This is its major difference from the government models in history which have claimed or claim to be “theocratic,” while being clerical in essence.

Describing the Baha’i religion in general, Sergeev notes: “if modernity offers short-term solutions to the social problems of humanity by focusing on external reforms, the Baha’i Faith envisions long-term changes based on the inner transformation of individual human beings... Similarly, the Baha’i teachings are designed with the aim of humanity’s global survival” (p. 112). The author summarizes the conclusions of his study in the following way: “...although some of the features of the Baha’i 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” (p. 117). He goes on to say: “First, Baha’i doctrines display spiritual depth, which is lacking in the Enlightenment ideology that relies purely on reason and external social reforms. Second, Baha’i teachings reaffirm most of the Enlightenment principles in a different religious setting thus making them more deeply rooted in the human psyche and consciousness. Third, the Baha’i ideology takes into consideration the disproportionate development of various nations on the planet by modifying and adjusting some of the Enlightenment principles

to better fit the whole of humanity.” He finally states: “Overall the Baha’i Faith represents a religious tradition that is neither antimodern nor simply modern or even postmodern... Such a position... gives the Baha’i Faith a unique attraction and an advantage over both the older and the more recent religious movements — an advantage that, if properly understood and appreciated, would reveal its high long-term potential” (pp. 117–118).

It should be acknowledged that Mikhail Sergeev’s book is undoubtedly a profound and thorough scholarly work, based on a wide range of sources. Not only is it a valuable contribution to studies in the evolution of human religious and social consciousness, but it also outlines possible perspectives for that evolution in the future. The author is an innovator with regard to the theory of “religious cycles” which he puts forward and convincingly substantiates. This theory deserves very serious consideration by experts in the relevant field. The counterarguments the present writer has made to certain points are more polemical than critical. Such a book is definitely in high demand and it will be duly appreciated by a wide range of scholars and students specializing in religion, social science, philosophy, culture and history.

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