

From: Sen McGlinn
To: bbst@yahoogroups.com (Bahai Biblical Studies)
Subject: Religion in change
Date sent: Sun, 21 Jan 2007 13:27:54 +0100

XX wrote:

- > So if we have now a fresh new Revelation in the Baha'i
- > Faith and it sheds light on the previous. The previous will adopt
- > new things as they see fit to please their following.

That's what I expect. I think that new religions arise where a society is passing through a boundary between one kind of structure and world-view and a radically new one. Sometimes that comes from the clash of cultures, for example the cargo cults that arose from western contacts in Melanesia, and native "churches" (really new religions, created by prophets) in Africa and New Zealand. But the most interesting religions arise when a whole civilization is going through a transformation, and does not know where it is going. Into a new an unknown world, where the only certainty is that many of the old ways won't work.

One way of seeing progressive revelation is what Seena Fazel calls triumphalism: the values and truths and community structures of the new religion formed at the transition make the others obsolete and they must fall away. The two big problems with triumphalism are first that it is a self-defeating prophecy, because a new religious community that goes around telling others that their religions are outdated and they are doomed to eventually merge into the new paradigm naturally creates resistance, and distance between the new religious group and the culture around it, so it ends up as a marginal cult. Bahais have done lots of that. The second problem is that it isn't true. Just look at history. How many new world religions have emerged since the time of Krishna, and how many followers of Krishna are there today? Of ancient religions, Hinduism and Buddhism have prospered, Zoroastrianism has almost died out, and Judaism has held its own and kept adapting.

My take on progressive revelation is that one function of the new revelation is to help the peoples of all religions through that boundary, to help them to find a new model of "what religion means in

society" and then to find the resources in their own revelations from which they can make a new form for the new age. The "help" does not have to be a well-meant friendly hand: a competitive polemic can also help if it drives people to use their own scriptures as a resource for the new situation. Christianity helped Pharisaic Judaism as much as vice versa, but I don't think the relationship was often friendly.

Shoghi Effendi writes:

Such institutions as have strayed far from the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ must of necessity, as the embryonic World Order of Baha'u'llah takes shape and unfolds, recede into the background, and make way for the progress of the divinely-ordained institutions that stand inextricably interwoven with His teachings. The indwelling Spirit of God which, in the Apostolic Age of the Church, animated its members, the pristine purity of its teachings, the primitive brilliancy of its light, will, no doubt, be reborn and revived as the inevitable consequences of this redefinition of its fundamental verities, and the clarification of its original purpose.

- > No religion of old
- > is the same as when revealed is it? We have better scholars and
- > methods now to dig into the past and come up with new
- > interpretations of former Scriptures

Nowadays we do have methods that are reasonably objective, so that other people can use them and come to similar conclusions. But we also use the same methods that have always been used: go to the text, and read it again in the light of the current situation. Jewish Rabbis have been doing this for two millennia. I do not think that the new methods (of the past 3 centuries) give us a flexibility that was not there before.

- > and so I'm wondering if this is furthering the
- > decline in those former religions.

Whatever methods are used, if we are anxiously concerned about the needs of the age we live in, and then go back to scriptures to redefine the religion's fundamental verities and clarify its purpose in the light of current needs, the religious conservatives will wail and gnash their teeth and call this a "decline." So Pius IX condemned

a long list of modernisms as anathema, and punished Catholic scholars who were not just using new methods, but coming up with new answers. Al-Azhar expelled Ali Abd-ar Raziq about the same time. More recently, Hans Kung had his teaching licence withdrawn. So it goes. The new is usually seen as a decline and a threat by the establishment, when in fact the new is the promise for the future. Only very rarely (St Francis) does the establishment recognise, at the time, that what is new is not necessarily wrong.

Based on Shoghi Effendi's analysis, I would expect many of the new forms of Christianity, from liberation theology and postmodern theologies to grass-roots churches, Christian feminism and the Christian ecology movement, and of course the ecumenical movement, to contribute to Christianity's transformation, to begin its new life in the postmodern age. Liberation theology and grass-roots churches have I think fed into the Alpha plan in Anglicanism. It's a ferment of cross-pollinating experiments.

- > The reason I ask this is because I
- > often read where some Muslim will say that there is nothing new in
- > Baha'i for they already had these teachings in the Qur'an and
- > Hadith.

Yes. For example, democracy is discovered in the Quranic concept of shura (consultation). Reinforced concrete is discovered in the story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn building a wall to keep out Gog and Magog. There is a whole genre of Islamic literature devoted to showing that all the new things of modernity were already there in the Islamic sources. This talk is used for two different purposes: to make it easier for Islamic societies to adopt modern thought, or to make it easier for them to adopt a modern technology without adopting the way of thinking that produced it. In the first case, it is a step towards a modern Islam. In the second case, it condemns Islamic societies to only adopting and borrowing the products of other societies, never developing the capacities to contribute to world society themselves.

Once a principle is known, and known to work, it can be found retrospectively in the scriptures. But it is usually the new religion, or the new religious movement on the fringe of an older religion, that has the new vision and new scripture that actually generates the principle, and puts it in practice to show it works. That's why I think the new religion functions as a midwife helping the older religions to come through the boundary and reinvent themselves.

- > In the natural sciences I learned that when the environment changes
- > the organism just adapt or perish. So our world environment has
- > changed and we now must deal with the clash of different cultures
- > but are we adapting or are we reacting to this motivation by once
- > again applying some form of imperialism? Is our model of
- > management, administration, govt, etc. based on some idea of God,
- > His Manifestation and Creation pyramid even though we claim to be a
- > Republic? Is relevant information from all levels reaching the
- > "powers that be" or are these "powers" acting in a sort of
- > totalitarian state of mind?

I am not sure if you are talking about the Bahai community or the world in general here, but it is applicable either way. We have several millenia of living with a hierarchical world-view yet we live, in postmodern society, in an organic structure that is a horizontal network. So we keep applying solutions that were right once, but are now counter-productive. The powers that be do operate with a mind-set in which the hierarchical order is ideal and anything else is a problem to be fixed, or a threat to exclude, and the people also look for and expect centrally-directed, uniform, hierarchical solutions to be given to them from on high. Ruhi for example. It is as much the product of the congregation mentality at the grassroots as a product of the I-know-so-I-have-the-answer at the top. Like the drug trade, the demand creates the supply. There's a big demand for centralised top-down authoritarianism.

- > And what does this have to do with bbst? Well, it may be
- > interesting to notice the changes in the ways we govern as new
- > Revelations appeared and that today it seems we need some sort of
- > group decision making instead of the god-like figure at the top of
- > the pyramid?

Hallelujah brother.

When the effectiveness of a decision depends largely on its level of support, broad involvement and broader communication are essential.

But it goes further. Who said that "governing" is the function that has to be at the top of the pyramid? What about "service" and "knowing" and "innovation" and "worship"? The idea that the essential thing about a society, or a religious community, is its power

structure is one of those things we inherited with the old world-view. Some businesses today, for example, would be happy with the idea that power structures are temporary and secondary: what matters to them is the capacity for innovation, rather than who makes the decisions. If there is no innovation, you've got a corpse, and who cares who runs a corpse? These business have broken out of the fixation with power which has marked the centralised, uniform, hierarchical nation-states of the modern era. Power becomes just one more function alongside others, in an organic structure