

<http://www.sonjavank.com/sen/> under Bahai-related postings; progressive revelation

On a non-triumphalist formulation of progressive revelation, which does not suppose that previous religions lose all force and future when a new religion appears, but rather that the old and new both have something to contribute. With a compilation of relevant texts

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From: Sen McGlinn
To: Tarikh list
Date sent: Sun, 08 Oct 2006

XX said:

> we can see a lateral "Progressive Revelation" at work.
> (Surely I'm not
> the only Baha'i who understands Progressive Revelation from such a
> perspective!

I certainly see it that way. We have only to glance at history to see that religions as bodies and cultures do not simply expire when a new religion emerges. They last typically some thousands of years, and it is not a pointless existence. I attended a session at the society of theologians conference in England recently, the talk being given by a Bahai on the subject of progressive revelation. It was painful, both because it was a naive supersecionist model, and because not just the speaker but also the Bahai Faith was then pilloried by the audience. The speaker seemed not to have thought about how offensive, and also how counter-intuitive, his assertions were. People in Islam and Christianity (background of most of the theologians attending) KNOW that the spirit has not disappeared from their faiths in 1844, or 620, or whenever.

My thought is this: Shoghi Effendi certainly looks forward to Christianity re-emerging in a purified form suited to the present age, Abdu'l-Baha seems to have worked quite hard to help Islam do the same (for example through `Abduh). I have appended some relevant quotations. Now supposing they knew what they were doing, we could come up with a theology of history in which

a) religions do not live indefinitely, and at any one time there is a pool of living religions contributing to human society and spiritual life: new ones with their vitality and freedom from past baggage, old ones with their historical richness and variety, very old ones that are passing from this world. Thus no religionists can expect their faith to last forever: this element of progressive revelation must be rationally accepted. What is objectionable about PR to people of other

religions is what is objectionable about history. The fact is that religions do not last forever. It may not be pleasant to be confronted with the obsolescence of religion today, by the upstart Bahais, but nobody who looks honestly at history can deny that it is inevitable eventually. For how long can one continue to think that Christ is the last word and remains 100% valid until the end of the world, when the promise of the imminent end of the world is 2000 years old, 3,000 years old, 4,000 years old ?

b) because religions do not last indefinitely, and because society sometimes goes through radical changes, new religions and their new insights are necessary. The pool must be refreshed. At the same time, there is a positive influence from deeper religious cultures to the new one: there is continuity but with a great freedom to select from the old.

c) successful new religions emerge in societies going through a climactic change, such as the change variously known as postmodernism or globalisation. One of the contributions of the new religion is to help older religious traditions to make the transition, after which they continue to exist. This assistance is not necessarily deliberate and benevolent: it may be that the competition with a religious community better adapted to the new world conditions helps an older religious community to see the challenge of the new in theological terms, and not merely as a cultural challenge.

d) every community entering the interreligious discussion has to construct a justification for itself for doing so. Muslims have used the notion of multiple prophets (eg Nurcholish Madjid in Taji-Farouki, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals*). The Islamic theological justification for other religious communities and their rights is a Quranic framework – but it is only the Muslim participants who are required to recognise this. The fact that Bahais explain their co-participation with other religions to themselves using the framework of progressive revelation does not require any other participants to accept this framework. We should present PR as our theology of history, not as a historical theory, and not as a doctrine that other religions can adopt as such.

One reason for the last stipulation is that a body of religious doctrine is a structured whole. PR in Bahai doctrine is intimately related to the doctrine of the relativity of religious truth. The relativity of truth in itself means limited truths, which are parts of the whole, which overlap and thus do not supersede. Religions (as religious communities) are constructed by us, and since we are conditional creatures, what we can know through the Manifestation is relative and conditioned. So we are left with relative knowledge only,

whatever its source, simply because we as receivers are limited.

" The fundamental principle enunciated by Baha'u'llah, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that Religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, " (Shoghi Effendi, Summary Statement - 1947, Special UN Committee on Palestine, similar text in Baha'i Administration, p. 185)

The partiality of our knowledge (even if we believe we have obtained it from the best source) enables us to accept overlap and continuity with the knowledge of other religious communities. It is not impossible that we may discover a better understanding of Bahai teachings through the study of Islam, as Shoghi Effendi once suggested.

Forgive these rushed notes. Some quotes to go, for I must stop this and cook dinner:

In 'The Unfoldment of World Civilization,' Shoghi Effendi says

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.

True, the minds of many are turned away from all that sounds religious, but it is only because they are ill-advised as to the meaning of true religion and it is just that mission that devolves upon us -- to give a new viewpoint, to revive fresh hopes and to guide by the sacred utterances the thoughts and actions of mankind.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 18)

Might it not happen -- every vigilant adherent of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh might well pause to reflect -- that out of this world eruption there may stream forces of such spiritual energy as shall recall, nay eclipse, the splendor of those signs and wonders that accompanied the establishment of the Faith of Jesus Christ? Might there not emerge out of the agony of a shaken world **a religious revival** of such scope and power as to even transcend the potency of those world-directing forces with which the Religions of the Past

have, at fixed intervals and according to an inscrutable Wisdom, revived the fortunes of declining ages and peoples? Might not the bankruptcy of this present, this highly-vaunted materialistic civilization, in itself clear away the choking weeds that now hinder the unfoldment and future efflorescence of God's struggling Faith?
(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 32)

23. O thou who dost search after truth! Thy letter of 13 December 1920 hath come.

From the days of Adam until today, the religions of God have been made manifest, one following the other, and each one of them fulfilled its due function, revived mankind, and provided education and enlightenment. They freed the people from the darkness of the world of nature and ushered them into the brightness of the Kingdom. As each succeeding Faith and Law became revealed it remained for some centuries a richly fruitful tree and to it was committed the happiness of humankind. However, as the centuries rolled by, it aged, it flourished no more and put forth no fruit, wherefore was it then made young again.

The religion of God is one religion, but it must ever be renewed. Moses, for example, was sent forth to man and He established a Law, and the Children of Israel, through that Mosaic Law, were delivered out of their ignorance and came into the light; they were lifted up from their abjectness and attained to a glory that fadeth not. Still, as the long years wore on, that radiance passed by, that splendour set, that bright day turned to night; and once that night grew triply dark, the star of the Messiah dawned, so that again a glory lit the world.

(*Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 51)

The Manifestations of universal Prophethood Who appeared independently are, for example, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. But the others who are followers and promoters are like Solomon, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For the independent Prophets are founders; They establish a new religion and make new creatures of men; They change the general morals, promote new customs and rules, **renew the cycle and the Law**. Their appearance is like the season of spring, which arrays all earthly beings in a new garment, and gives them a new life.

(Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 164)

Now, consider: **Christ frequently repeated that the Ten Commandments in the Pentateuch were to be followed, and He insisted that they should be maintained.** Among the Ten Commandments is one which says: "Do not worship any picture or image." [1] At present in some of the Christian churches many pictures and images exist. It is, therefore, clear and evident that the Religion of God does not maintain its original principles among the people, but that it has gradually changed and altered until it has been entirely destroyed and annihilated. Because of this the manifestation is renewed, and a new religion established. But if religions did not change and alter, there would be no need of renewal.

(Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 165)

The Bayan is in truth Our conclusive proof for all created things, and all the peoples of the world are powerless before the revelation of its verses. It enshrineth the sum total of all the Scriptures, whether of the past or of the future, even as Thou art the Repository of all Our proofs in this Day. ... Indeed no religion shall We ever inaugurate unless it be renewed in the days to come.

(*Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 159)

There burned in his soul the conviction that no reform, however drastic, within the Faith of Islam, could achieve the regeneration of this perverse people. He knew, and was destined by the Will of God to demonstrate, that nothing short of a new and independent Revelation, as attested and foreshadowed by the sacred Scriptures of Islam, could **revive the fortunes and restore the purity of that decadent Faith.**

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 1)

He had been in the company of Shaykh Ahmad for only a few weeks, when the latter, turning to him one day, addressed him in these words: "Remain in your house and cease attending my lectures. Such of my disciples as may feel perplexed will turn henceforth to you, and will seek to obtain from you directly whatsoever assistance they may require. You will, through the knowledge which the Lord your God has bestowed upon you, resolve their problems and tranquillise their hearts. By the power of your utterance you will help **to revive the sorely neglected Faith of Muhammad**, your illustrious ancestor."

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 10)

Bahá'u'lláh alone shone as the potential Deliverer of a Cause that was fast speeding to its end. The marks of clear vision, of courage and sagacity which He had shown on more than one occasion ever since He had risen to champion the Cause of the Báb, appeared to qualify Him, should His life and continued existence in Persia be ensured, **to revive the fortunes of an expiring Faith.**

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 655)