

7-2016

Review of Sergeev's "Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá'í Faith"

Maria Kaplun

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaplun, Maria (2016) "Review of Sergeev's "Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá'í Faith"," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss4/8>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolf@georgefox.edu.

Mikhail Sergeev, *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá'í Faith*. Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015. 161 pp. MyBook paperback, ISBN: 9004300031

Reviewed by: Maria Kaplun, MTS, Emerson College, Boston, MA

Mikhail Sergeev's *Theory of Religious Cycles* opens with an intriguing claim: all scripture-based religions develop along the same cycle, following a "nearly identical pattern." In this cycle Sergeev discerns six stages: (1) the formative, during which the scriptures are written and the tradition is established; (2) the orthodox, when tradition cements itself by fighting against "heretical movements"; (3) the classical, when new interpretations are added to the canon and sacred tradition is reformulated; (4) the reformist, in which the faithful attempt to restore the pure tradition and to get back to the core of the original teachings; (5) the critical, at which point a systemic crisis shakes up the tradition's foundation, its scriptures are challenged, and the result is the birth of new, offshoot religious movements, such as Christianity from Judaism or Buddhism from Hinduism; (6) the postcritical, during which the religious system renews and reconfirms its foundation through competition with its newborn daughter-faith, restoring the authority of its primary scriptures. It appears that nothing prevents these phases from coexisting in time, for such is the case in Buddhism, where Sergeev identifies the orthodox, classical, and reformist phases with the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana branches, respectively.

After explaining his premise, the author briefly summarizes the histories of Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, pointing out where the first four or five phases of cyclical development fall on their timelines. The summaries are a bit uneven. Some information is rather basic and referenced to sources like Mary Fisher's college-level textbook *Living Religions*. On occasion, I had questions about the narrative itself. For instance, in the section on Judaism, Sergeev writes that "[t]he destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and the following second exile marked the beginning of the critical phase of Biblical religion. . . . It was in those times that Christianity was born in the midst of its mother-faith of Judaism while Judaism itself had to redefine its own scriptural foundations, religious institutions, and ritualistic practices" (15). However, we know that Christianity was born decades before the fall of the Second Temple and had its roots in the times and movements going as far back as the Babylonian exile. It

could not be a response to the disaster of 70 CE. By the same token, the restructuring of Judaism was not a response to then-nascent Christianity. The situation thus does not seem to fit the theory of cycles as presented in the book.

Unfortunately, such glitches are not the biggest problem of Professor Sergeev's theory. While I was initially quite taken with the promise of a universal theory of religious development, I have found that the book does not deliver on that promise. Sergeev declares that "all religions share a common pattern in their historical development" (105), but from the outset he takes multiple exceptions to his own rule. He does not discuss "the so-called primal religions" (9) because they are not scripturally based. Chinese religions of Confucianism and Taoism are excluded because, the author claims, they began as philosophies and developed into religions later, not having been meant as such by their founders (9). Hinduism is not considered in the book because it is "a very ancient faith whose origin and evolution ... cannot be traced with historical accuracy" (10). The same reason is given for omitting the religions of Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, Maya, and others (10). Sergeev ignores "the so-called small-scale religions of Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and Sikhism" because he believes that "their inclusion in this book will not significantly enhance or alter the overall projection of global history" (10). I think this is a shame. The author claims that these "small-scale" religions' histories proceed according to his idea of cycles, and with some more research he could add, if not universality, at least some diversity and more authority to his theoretical assertions. As it stands, the discussion of the cyclical pattern is limited to only four major world religions, three of which are scripturally-related Abrahamic faiths, and only one of which—Christianity—truly fits the pattern he describes.

Finished with the initial expositions, Professor Sergeev devotes a chapter to Modernity and its source, the Enlightenment, which he regards as a systemic crisis of Christianity, occasionally hinting at a broader interpretation: as a global crisis of spirituality. Sergeev reasonably points out that the Enlightenment ideology brought into question the Christian scriptures and the traditional foundations of society, caused the blossom of alternative worldviews like deism and atheism, and created emphasis on pure reason, influencing numerous cultures and regions.

Among the positive effects of Modernity, the author acknowledges de-absolutization of political power and separation of church and state, which paved the way for the rule of law and human rights and freedoms in modern states. On the other hand, he lists the same separation between church and state as a negative effect of the Enlightenment. Writes Mikhail Sergeev:

Historically, the main purpose of separation of church and state was to protect religious groups from oppression... However, [it] produced some unintended consequences... I am referring to the secularization of society and the deterioration of conventional morality. ... [T]he rapid decline of moral standards in Western countries in the twentieth century reveals, perhaps, the most dangerous implication of the consistent separation between church and state. Religion is the soil in which the seeds of morality grow into the flowers of human righteousness. Morality is inseparable from religion... It is also inseparable from the state institutions... Pure reason is incapable of generating concrete moral values, not to mention of persuading people to follow them. And the state, if it is completely separated from the real source of ethics and ethical conduct, which is religion, will inevitably decline in the moral sphere. (46-47)

That religion is the only source of morality and that its lack will inevitably result in ethical deterioration and depravity is a claim, I am sure, that over a billion of the world's atheists, agnostics, and their allies would find at best debatable and at worst offensive. That such a claim is made in a book about world religions, which is intended therefore for an educated interfaith and academic audience, is eyebrow-raising. The author provides no support for his assertion either statistical or philosophical. For him it appears to be an axiom, and this is not the only place where part of his scholarly theory rests on his personal moral opinion.

Another example is the discussion of the “prescriptive nature and relative progression of the religious laws and ordinances” (68), where Professor Sergeev compares marriage laws in Christianity and Islam. He cites the New Testament to state that Christianity prescribes monogamy, permits marriage with unbelievers, and forbids divorce. He quotes the Qur’an to say that Islam, on the contrary, permits polygamy and divorce and forbids marriage with unbelievers outside of the “people of the Book.” From this the author draws the conclusion that a chronologically later religion can be in some ways more regressive than the earlier one, and he supports his conclusion with nothing but a nod and a wink—no data and no argument—as though his position that “the evolution of marriage from polygamy to

monogamy with the stricter rules for divorce constitutes moral progress for humanity” (69) were a matter of easy agreement with the whole of his audience.

Part 2 of the book is devoted to the case of the Bahá’í Faith as an example of a modern religion that was born after the Enlightenment. Sergeev states that it was “conceived as a response to the global crisis of spirituality and, more specifically, to the systemic crisis of Christianity” (107). This, then, is Sergeev’s exploration of the postcritical phase of the Western religious landscape—the new religious movement, which he sees to be still half way through its formative phase. It was initially unclear to me why, if he considers the Enlightenment to have been more than anything a systemic crisis of Christianity, he picked for analysis and comparison to Christianity a religion that formed in Persia, within the context of Islam. The postcritical phase of Islam is never analyzed. Yet other religious movements, just as global, which had branched off Christianity, originated about the same time, and even got mentioned by Sergeev, were available to analyze here: take, for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Sergeev’s selection of the Bahá’í seemed somewhat random and less relevant than some other modern movements would be, and I was puzzled until I found his explicit explanation: “A careful study of [post-modern religions’] doctrines led me to believe that the best match for my theory would be the Bahá’í Faith” (53). It appears, the others just do not fit the pattern.

Let me say, the discussion of the Bahá’í Faith, especially its critique, is the best part of Sergeev’s book. It is informative (with a caveat that I am not a Bahá’í Faith scholar and may have missed an error), sympathetic, logical, and yet increasingly critical. The author presents both modern and counter-modern features of the religion: its democratic structure and its intolerance of organized dissent; its present advocacy of separation of church from state and its ultimate plans for the conflation of church and state; its emphasis on unity coexisting with its laws on infallibility and misogyny; and more. It is interesting to discover one by one the common features between the Bahá’í Faith and the Catholic Church.

This section, just as the whole of the book, is speckled with some factual errors and some perceived irrelevancies, but they may be worth ignoring. Throughout the book, these minor problems can be rather distracting and range from bizarre notions to scholarly mistakes. At one point Professor Sergeev

cites a source informing us that in the state of Nebraska “no official political parties exist” (101), at another he suggests that a role “similar to the president of the American republic” (to approve or veto laws) is “legislative” (100). He says explicitly that the “Christian culture, for instance, gave rise to the ancient Roman [among others] civilization[.]” (77). He numbers the reformist phase of his own cycle “third” instead of fourth (27) and, contrary to a given promise, never comes back after the initial summaries to talk about the postcritical phases of the religions other than Christianity, leaving Buddhism and Islam just “hanging” there. At one point he seems seriously yet casually to suggest that, within the Christian frame of reference, the Bahá’í Faith is the New Revelation in the midst of the Apocalypse which is Modernity (111). All through the book, Sergeev pays an inordinate amount of attention to Russia. This is understandable, for the scholar himself is from there, but his topic has no particular connection to Russia, and an overwhelming prevalence of quotes from Russian philosophy accompanied by detours into periods of Russian history, one of those four pages long, read, in the best case, tangential and strained.

In conclusion, I would say that *Theory of Religious Cycles* is not without value, especially Part 2, where the history and critique of the Bahá’í Faith is presented. Sergeev’s theory of cyclical development itself sounds promising at first but falls short for lack of representative samples or follow-through. If Sergeev believes in his theory, my advice to him would be to flesh it out, to tighten it up, and then to come back. I am interested enough to wait.