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

Natalya Shelkovaya

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**Mikhail Sergeev, *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity and the Baha'i Faith*. Leiden: Brill, 2015).**

**Reviewed by: Natalya V. Shelkovaya, PhD in Philosophy, Associate Professor (Kharkov, Ukraine)**

The main and very productive idea of the theory of religious cycles by M. Sergeev in *Theory of Religious Cycles* is to present *religion as a living organism*, which, like any living organism, passes through some stages: birth, development, maturity, dying and death. Sergeev identifies six stages (phases) of religion: formative, orthodox, classical, reformist, critical and post-critical. The process of formation of religious teachings, sacred texts, and sacred traditions takes place in the formative stages. "The orthodox phase 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, on the contrary, purify tradition from the accumulated interpretations in order to return to the core of sacred teachings and restore the original faith"(7). The critical phase comes when immutable canons and traditions are crumbling, and the impression is that this religion is dying. But, as in nature, there is a continuous cycle of death and new birth. As in a living organism, the birth of a new spiritual tradition follows the apparent "death" of its mother faith. Moreover, both the "mother religion" and the "new-born faith" continue to evolve.

According to Sergeev's theory, structural and systemic crises arise at certain stages of the development of religion and are the driving force behind its evolution. If the structural crises lead to modifications of religion, then the systemic crises lead to the emergence of a new faith from the depths of the old one. According to this approach, every crisis of religion is an impulse for the further development of religion and is similar to the "birth pangs" in living organisms, which are frequently painful, but lead to the birth of a new organism (a new interpretation of the

teachings, of the new trend, of a new religion). In this way, crises are necessary for the evolution of all aspects of existence.

In this perspective, religion allows us to see anew the crises taking place in the modern world: not in the apocalyptic terms as the "end of the world," but in the sense of "eternal return," the eternal cycle of life: birth-life-death-birth, etc. In other words, we are talking not only about a religious but also a social and global crisis, in the process of which a new type of civilization is painfully coming into being.

No less productive is the emphasis Sergeev places on the fact that it is *culture, the core of which is the sacred cult, which creates civilization*. The neglect of cultural roots by society, degradation of culture, and the destruction of its nucleus--sacred cult--is similar to the destruction of the roots of the tree of civilization. This inevitably leads to a "drying up," "rotting," and "dying" of civilization. However, history shows that it is not quite correct to identify a theocratic state with society and social wellbeing with spiritual wellbeing. A sad example would be the Holy Roman Empire, where the Inquisition flourished.

The "life of religion" depends on the interpretation of its sacred texts and the materialization of its spiritual teachings, their embodiment in real life. During this time, religious doctrine is often distorted, sometimes producing its exact opposite. How can the Inquisition of the Catholic Church be reconciled with the teachings of Christ, espousing the principle of universal love, including love towards one's enemies that is contained in the Gospels? Is it conceivable to consider Islamic terrorism to be the embodiment of the Qur'anic teaching about jihad as a fight against one's own imperfections? That is why, when Sergeev is carrying out an analysis of the evolution of religion, he takes as its basis, primarily, scriptures and sacred traditions, and considers the problem of their interpretation to be of special importance. For it is the hermeneutic problem of interpretation and understanding of the sacred texts, and the embodiment of them in religious traditions, that become an arena of struggle and conflicts,

leading to the schisms in religions, and not only in the "religions of the Book" (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), but also in such a "non-book religion" as Buddhism (which had created the largest scriptures in the world of 729 pitaka-pagodas with the text of *Tipitaka* in *Kuthodaw Paya*).

In the course of presentation of his theory of religious cycles, Sergeev conducts a comprehensive analysis of the transformation in the perception of the world, carried out by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which absolutizes reason and neglects the culture of heart, which is the core of religion. This process, continuing until today, has led to the development of atheism, most clearly manifested in the Soviet society, and, as a consequence, in the growth of egoism, individualism, immorality, and lack of spirituality.

Therefore, the culmination of Sergeev's research is a description of a religion, which can revive the degraded modern spirituality of humankind. This religion, according to Sergeev's views, is the Bahá'í Faith. It was born from Islam as a result of its systemic crisis. Sergeev argues and demonstrates that it is this religion that absorbs the best features and eliminates the disadvantages of both other world religions and various forms of political states that existed throughout human history. It potentially integrates in itself the functions of both religion and state, even more so the global state.

Sergeev makes a convincing case that the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith could in reality lead humankind to a harmonious balance; stop social and religious conflicts, and wars; and establish social justice on the basis of spiritual perfection.

First of all, this is the main principle of the Bahá'í Faith—the principle of unity: “the unity of God, the unity of religions and the global unity of mankind” (65). The unity of religions stems from the recognition of one God and, therefore, the single Source for all religions. Therefore “Bahá'ís revere such prominent spiritual figures as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha,

Krishna, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and, finally, the twin prophets of the Bahá'í Faith itself, the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh, as the Manifestations of God” (66).

The unity of humankind is achieved by cultivating the sense of love toward all people. While developing the ideas of his father Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá put an important emphasis on the fact that *true religion generates love in the heart. If religion leads to conflicts and hatred, it is not a religion.* “If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, then it would be better to live without it... Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is not a religion,” said 'Abdu'l-Bahá (79). This idea seems to be the cornerstone of the Bahá'í Faith and it offers the prospect for the spiritual rebirth of humanity.

What are the perspectives in the development of the Bahá'í Faith? Will it not be another utopia of world conciliar society, about which the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov dreamed, however, coming to an understanding at the end of his life that it is impractical? Will Bahá'í Faith not suffer the fate of other religions, in which the human ego prevailed over the Divine, leading to innumerable conflicts and disasters for humankind? And if one accepts Sergeev's concept of religious cycles, then today the Bahá'í Faith is only evolving through the formative phase of its own development. Is humanity ready for the realization of deep spiritual principles of this religion? Will it be able to implement them? Will people be able to sacrifice their selfishness, learn to love everyone, be tolerant of other faiths and people, get rid of the arrogant encroachment on the ultimate truth in the name of their religion, their nation, their state, their own “I”? The future will show.

This review identified only those ideas and aspects of Sergeev's research, which are the most important and fruitful in the fields of philosophy and psychology of religion. At the same time it should be noted that the author has carried out a profound analysis of historical, sociological, and political perspectives in the evolution of religion and religious worldview, an analysis that deserves special attention. I refer to his discussion of the changes in social and

religious perception of the world in pre-modern, modern, and post-modern eras, with an emphasis on the special role in this process of the ideas of the Enlightenment; the emergence and development of two important religious and philosophical currents of Russian social thought of the 20th century—Slavophiles and Westernizers, which, in my view, continue to exist in modern Russia. The dominant feature, permeating the entire study, is a comparative analysis of religions (Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá'í Faith) in order to substantiate the author's theory of religious cycles and the necessary emergence of the Bahá'í Faith, in which, according to Sergeev, there is a “sublation” of all the best features from previous religions.

There is no doubt that Sergeev's theory of religious cycles and his philosophical, sociological and political analysis of the evolution of religion, presents a significant scholarly value, not only in theological but also in philosophical and sociological contexts, because, as I have shown above, it sets the landmarks of understanding and reinterpretation of pressing problems of modern humanity.