

Seven Narratives of Religion: A Framework for Engaging Contemporary Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how the contemporary academic discourse on religion is, on the whole, beginning to resonate with the broader vision of religion provided by the Bahá'í Writings. Toward this end, I argue that the contemporary academic discourse on religion pivots around seven narrative frameworks, which I describe respectively as the (1) subtraction, (2) renewal, (3) transsecular, (4) post-naturalist, (5) construct, (6) perennial, and (7) developmental narratives. Each of the narratives offers unique insights into the historical evolution of religion and the changing place of religion in the modern world, many of which align with the Bahá'í teachings. I endeavor to substantiate this claim in three steps. First, I discuss the theory of secularization and the nature of its recent disruption in order to elucidate the narrative problematic that lies at the heart of the contemporary academic discourse on religion. Second, I analyze the seven narrative frameworks and show how each resonates with certain aspects of Bahá'í teachings. And third, I conclude by considering how my typology of seven narratives could be used to frame further inquiry.

Resumé

Le présent article vise à explorer comment le discours académique contemporain sur la religion commence, globalement, à faire écho à la vision élargie de la religion que l'on retrouve dans les écrits bahá'ís. À cette fin, je soutiens que le discours académique contemporain sur la religion s'articule autour de sept perspectives, ou cadres narratifs, que je décris comme : 1) de soustraction, 2) de renouvellement, 3) transséculier, 4) postnaturaliste, 5) de fabrication, 6) de pérennité et 7) de progression. Ces perspectives, plusieurs desquelles concordent avec les enseignements bahá'ís, jettent chacune à sa façon un éclairage particulier sur l'évolution de la religion dans l'histoire et sur l'espace changeant que celle-ci occupe dans le monde moderne. Je tente d'accréditer ce postulat en trois étapes. D'abord, j'examine la théorie de la sécularisation et la nature des revers qu'elle a connus récemment afin d'élucider la problématique narrative qui est au cœur du discours académique contemporain sur la religion. J'analyse ensuite les sept cadres narratifs et démontre en quoi chacun d'eux fait écho à certains aspects des enseignements bahá'ís. Enfin, j'examine comment ma typologie des sept cadres narratifs pourrait servir de balise pour d'autres recherches.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es explorar de qué manera el discurso académico contemporáneo acerca de la religión está, en general, comenzando a resonar con la visión más amplia de la religión proporcionada por los Escritos Bahá'ís. Hacia este fin, argumento que el discurso académico contemporáneo acerca de la religión gira alrededor de siete marcos narrativos, las

cuales describo respectivamente como (1) resta, (2) renovación, (3) transsecular, (4) postnaturista, (5) constructo, (6) perenne, y (7) narrativas de desarrollo. Cada una de las narrativas—muchas de las cuales se alinean con las enseñanzas Bahá'ís—ofrece percepciones únicas de la evolución histórica de la religión y el lugar cambiante de la religión en el mundo moderno. Me esmero por substanciar esta afirmación en tres pasos. Primero, discuto la teoría de secularización y la naturaleza de su reciente ruptura para elucidar la problemática narrativa que yace en el corazón del discurso académico contemporáneo sobre la religión. Segundo, analizo los siete marcos narrativos mencionados previamente y demuestro cómo cada uno resuena con ciertos aspectos de las enseñanzas Bahá'ís. Y tercero, concluyo al considerar en qué forma mi tipología de siete narrativas se puede utilizar para enmarcar investigación adicional.

THE THEORY OF SECULARIZATION

The theory of secularization involves three basic claims about the relationship between modernity and religion. First, it argues that modernity removes religion from the social-foundational role that it played during pre-modernity and forces religion to become but one sphere of endeavor among others (e.g., science, politics, and economics). Second, it contends that the cultural, political, and intellectual influence of religion will dwindle as the forces of modernity advance. And third, secularization theory claims that, whatever influence modern religion retains will be increasingly resigned to the private

sphere (Casanova 19–20). Advocates of secularization theory generally locate these dynamics within a broader narrative perspective, arguing, for example, that religion initially arose as a way of coping with the ignorance and powerlessness that plagued early human existence, but must now be abandoned in order for humanity to follow the more mature path of secular modernity (see, for example, Dennett).

The theory of secularization was originally advanced by Enlightenment thinkers who felt that modern Europe was the pinnacle of human civilization and that the rest of humanity would become more like Europeans as it continued to advance (Comte; Hume). This theory was later systematized and refined by the likes of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, two founding fathers of modern social science (Durkheim; Hughey). It achieved a paradigmatic status within modern social science during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, when numerous states began aggressively curtailing religion's ability to influence the public sphere throughout the world.¹ Even those who did not predict

1 Toft, Philpott, and Shah provide numerous empirical examples of these anti-religious twentieth century dynamics: "In the 1910s and 1920s, that part of the Russian Orthodox Church that was not wiped out became an arm of the Soviet state; the Catholic Church in Mexico was criminalized and deprived of its property and its right to engage in political activity; the Ottoman caliphate and sharia law were

religion's marginalization and decline were influenced by secularization theory, as academic methods increasingly demanded that apparently religious forces be reduced to a conjunction of cultural, ethical, political, psychological, and economic concerns (Philpott).

However, secularization theory has fallen on hard times in recent decades. This shift has been primarily stimulated by a recognition of the central role that religious considerations have played in a number of prominent instances of political conflict and revolution (e.g., the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, the Iranian revolution, the development of Hindu nationalism in India and Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, the role of Catholicism in overthrowing communism in Eastern Europe, religious

abolished in Turkey, much to the outrage of Muslims around the world, particularly in British India; in the 1930s and into the 1940s, the Nazis refused to permit the independence of religious bodies in preaching, education, and publication in Nazi-controlled countries and arrested or murdered thousands of religious leaders who resisted the National Socialist policy of subordinating religious institutions to the state; in the late 1950s, the Lamaist theocracy in Tibet was systematically destroyed and the Dalai Lama ultimately forced into exile by Chinese Communists; and perhaps the largest grassroots religious organization in the Muslim world, the Muslim Brotherhood, was decimated and driven underground by Egyptian authorities in the 1950s and 1960s" (71–72).

nonviolent civil disobedience movements, the rise of Evangelical politics in the United States, and the attacks of 9/11). Recent demographic studies have also been significant, showing that the overwhelming majority of the world's population remains just as religious as ever before, if not more so. For example, the World Values Survey, carried out across fifty-six countries from the 1980s to the early 2000s, found that levels of religious belief increased from 80% to 83% of the world's population during this period. The only region where levels decreased was Western Europe, and still only from 81% to 78%. Levels of religious belief alternately increased in Eastern Europe from 68% to 78%, while the percentage of Chinese who cited "religion" as a major influence in their life grew from 22% to 36% (Philpott 191). Other studies have undermined the idea that modernity and religion are somehow at odds by showing how religion has played an important role in encouraging many non-Western peoples to accept modern science, modern medicine, and democratic politics (Micklethwait and Wooldridge; van der Veer). Indeed, the theory of secularization has been challenged in so many ways that numerous prominent thinkers are beginning to claim that it has been falsified outright (Berger; Dreyfus and Kelly; Taylor, *A Secular Age*).

Nevertheless, researchers have not yet reached consensus about how to alternately narrate religious history. Certainly, it is clear that religion has

evolved from its tribal beginnings through the archaic, axial, and medieval periods, up into modernity and the current global age. But it is difficult to specify the forces that have driven this process forward. Indeed, it is not even clear what other narrative possibilities exist. How many narratives of religious history currently exist? Which authors argue for which? How does each narrative characterize the historical evolution of religion? How does each make sense of modernity? What future trajectories do they envision? How do they explain the contemporary resurgence of religion? This state of narrative perplexity, which I describe as the “postsecular problematic” (Schewel), lies at the heart of the contemporary academic discourse on religion.

SEVEN NARRATIVES

Seven prominent narrative frameworks shape the contemporary academic study of religion, which I describe respectively as the (1) subtraction, (2) renewal, (3) transsecular, (4) postnaturalist, (5) construct, (6) perennial, and (7) developmental narratives. Each narrative provides a distinct account of the historical evolution of religion and offers a unique perspective on the role that religion plays in the modern world, certain elements of which resonate with the Bahá'í teachings.²

² My purpose in offering this typology is not to claim that everyone who thinks

THE SUBTRACTION NARRATIVE

Subtraction narratives claim that religion arose as a way of coping with the forces of ignorance, powerlessness, and cultural passivity that dominated early human existence. Overcoming these forces, which we appeared to be doing during the period of modernity, ought therefore to make us decreasingly religious. Secularization theory exemplifies the subtraction narrative framework well. However, the terms “secular” and “secularization” have been subject to so much debate in recent years that it is often more analytically precise to use the term “subtraction.”³ The recent disruption

about religion today operates within one and only one narrative framework, as one finds numerous instances of overlap and cross-fertilization. However, most academic researchers proceed primarily within one narrative framework. Indeed, many are so habituated to their particular narrative lens that they see all others as naïve and out of touch. In this way, those who encourage modern Western society to renew its engagement with orthodox Christianity (e.g., MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Milbank) often respond with vitriol to those who present religion as an accident of biological evolution that is gradually being worked out of human existence (e.g., Dennett; Dawkins), and vice versa. A secondary aim of this article is to undermine these polemical tendencies by identifying the narrative frameworks that underlie such diverse contributions and critically evaluating their respective merits.

³ Daniel Philpott explains that the

of secularization theory has forced advocates of subtraction narratives to explain why religion has not followed the expected course. In this light, some argue that the so-called resurgence of religion is nothing more than a contest of cultural identities within a decidedly irreligious pattern of social life (Gauchet), while others point to the resurgence of religion as proof of the fact that secularization is not necessary or guaranteed; it is simply the way things ought to unfold.

Daniel Dennett offers a good example of this latter line of thought.⁴ He argues that religion historically arose from the interaction of our tendency to see more agency than there is in the world and our desire to continue accessing our deceased parents' knowledge. Religion thus stems from a combination of false perception and wishful thinking. In order to combat the falsification that such beliefs must inevitably encounter, religious leaders have historically striven to create ever more abstract, and hence difficult to falsify, notions of divinity. This process continued until God was conceived as little more than the lawgiver of the world. During the Enlightenment, a number of remarkable thinkers saw

that this concept was merely a placeholder for the system of blind natural laws that actually governs the world, and stimulated unprecedented advancement by accordingly embracing naturalism. A growing number of educated people have subsequently walked the same irreligious path. However, the overwhelming majority of people have not. Indeed, religion is becoming an increasingly important force in the world today. Dennett thus recommends that irreligious thinkers learn to curb religion's influence through effective political regulation and a radical extension of scientific education in order to keep humanity on the proper secularizing course.

Obviously, the basic claim of the subtraction narrative—that religion must undergo a process of marginalization and decline as the forces of modernity advance—is not one that appears in the Bahá'í teachings. However, the Bahá'í teachings do acknowledge that certain aspects of previous religious epochs must be abandoned as civilization evolves. As Shoghi Effendi explains,

If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should

term "secular" is used in nine different ways in current academic literature ("Has Global the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?").

⁴ Other subtraction narratives include August Comte, Richard Dawkins, John Dewey, David Hume, Steve Bruce (*Secularization*), and Ara Norenzayan.

these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? (41)

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í teachings also claim that aspects of previous religious epochs have been problematically discarded and that the general decline of religion's ability to influence human behavior is a great source of chaos in the world today. These aspects of the Bahá'í view of religion resonate more closely with the renewal narrative framework.

THE RENEWAL NARRATIVE

Renewal narratives claim that modern society has problematically abandoned a certain religious truth that inhabitants of an earlier time more adequately embraced, and that doing so has caused most of the problems that plague the modern world. We can therefore only resolve our contemporary crises by somehow renewing this older religious truth. Like subtraction narratives, renewal narratives posit an inverse relationship between modernity and religion: the more modern humanity is, the less (authentic) religion we see, and vice versa. The only difference is that subtraction narratives see the emergence of modernity as a good thing, while renewal narratives generally present it as a spiritual disaster. This is particularly true of the various fundamentalisms that idolize "some perfect embodiment of the true

religion in the past" and seek to bring humanity back to its ways (Bruce, *Fundamentalism* 12–13). However, we also find sophisticated renewal narratives among, for example, Christian thinkers who believe that the modern West has hastily abandoned traditional religion (e.g., Milbank).

Alasdair MacIntyre falls within this domain.⁵ He argues that the "virtue tradition" of moral inquiry, which began with the ancient Greeks and reached its apotheosis in Thomistic Catholicism, provided the soil out of which the best features of Western morality grew (*Whose Justice?*). Nevertheless, the West abandoned the virtue tradition during the Enlightenment. As a result, we fell into a state of perpetual moral conflict, whereby competing groups now strive to gain enough power to enforce their moral intuitions on others. Indeed, MacIntyre argues that the problem has become so trenchant that the only way forward is for small groups of believers to remove themselves from mainstream society and begin constructing "local forms of community within which [the virtue tradition] can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us" (*After Virtue* 263).

The Bahá'í teachings confirm the idea that the modern decline of

5 Other significant renewal narratives include those of Martin Heidegger (Young), Muhammad, Mircea Eliade, Zimmerman, and Protestant theology more broadly (Holder).

authentic religion has caused many crippling crises. Consider the following selection from *The Promise of World Peace*, penned by the Universal House of Justice:

However vital a force religion has been in the history of mankind, and however dramatic the current resurgence of militant religious fanaticism, religion and religious institutions have, for many decades, been viewed by increasing numbers of people as irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world. In its place they have turned either to the hedonistic pursuit of material satisfactions or to the following of man-made ideologies designed to rescue society from the evident evils under which it groans. . . . How tragic is the record of the substitute faiths that the worldly-wise of our age have created. In the massive disillusionment of entire populations who have been taught to worship at their altars can be read history's irreversible verdict on their value. The fruits these doctrines have produced, after decades of an increasingly unrestrained exercise of power by those who owe their ascendancy in human affairs to them, are the social and economic ills that blight every region of our world in the closing years of the twentieth century. (5)

Contrary to most renewal narratives, though, the Bahá'í teachings

reject the idea that humanity can solve its contemporary crises by revitalizing an older religious configuration. To the contrary, only the coming of a new Manifestation of God can stimulate the needed renewal. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

Every time [a Manifestation of God] appears, the world is renewed, and a new cycle is founded. The body of the world of humanity puts on a new garment. It can be compared to the spring; whenever it comes, the world passes from one condition to another. . . . Christ with this power has renewed this cycle. . . . In the same way, the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh was like a new springtime which appeared with holy breezes, with the hosts of everlasting life, and with heavenly power. It established the Throne of the Divine Kingdom in the center of the world and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, revived souls and established a new cycle. (*Some Answered Questions* 145)

The important point here is that Bahá'u'lláh's coming inaugurated a qualitatively new cycle of religious life, not simply renewed what came before. In this regard, the Bahá'í teachings take us beyond the framework of renewal and encourage us to examine the novel transformative forces that are operating in the world today. This brings us closer to the insights provided by the transsecular narrative lens.

THE TRANSSSECULAR NARRATIVE

Transsecular narratives re-characterize the forces identified by secularization theorists as part of a broader process that does not stimulate religion's marginalization and decline but rather its transformation. The idea here is that the spread of democracy, modern science and technology, literacy and education, capitalism, and the political ideals of freedom and self-determination, to name a few, do not necessarily dismantle religion or undermine its influence but rather fundamentally alter its operation. Transsecular narratives thus posit a more positive relationship between religion and modernity than either subtraction or renewal narratives do. Indeed, some authors go as far as to argue that the forces of modernity actually strengthen religion's ability to influence society.

Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah present one such account. They argue that the political influence of religion did decline as the global system of nation-states arose following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This process reached a high mark with the rise of fervently antireligious secular states during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. However, the gradual spread of democracy, capitalism, and modern technology undermined this secularizing trend by providing religious actors with resources to effectively mobilize their transnational communities to influence global affairs. As these globalizing forces show no sign of abating,

the authors suggest that religion's public influence ought also to continue to expand.⁶

The basic intuition of the transsecular narrative fits well with the idea, central to the Bahá'í teachings, that humanity is currently proceeding through an age of transition. As the Universal House of Justice explains,

The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia [1844]. That our Earth has contracted into a neighbourhood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. ("Statement")

Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá praises the modern developments of "constitutional law and democratic government, the rule of law, universal education, the protection of human rights, economic development, religious tolerance, the promotion of useful sciences and technologies and programmes of public welfare," and argues that their proper implementation only strengthen religion (cited in The Universal House of Justice, "A

6 Other examples of transsecular narratives include Charles Taylor (*Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*), Rodney Stark (*Triumph of Christianity*), Stephen Gaukroger, Peter Berger, David Sorkin, and Andrew Preston.

Letter Written to the Bahá'ís of Iran, Dated 26 November, 2003").

At the same time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns against the tendency to confuse such forces with the materialistic ideologies that today emanate from the West. Most subtraction narratives fall prey to this tendency by claiming that humanity will become more like secular Europeans as it continues to advance. Transsecular narratives tend not to confuse European secularism with modernity as such. However, they still generally embrace a Western-centric perspective by presenting the much more religious United States as the ideal toward which other peoples must inevitably move, often under the guise of terms like "democratization."⁷ The Bahá'í teachings alternately help us "look below surface phenomena" and see that a broader and more profound spiritual force is animating the modern transformations of religion (The Universal House of Justice, "A Letter Written to the Bahá'ís of Iran, Dated 26 November, 2003").

THE POSTNATURALIST NARRATIVE

Postnaturalist narratives argue that modern science rightly disrupted pre-modern views of nature but has been falsely bound to a powerful naturalistic ideology. The perceived conflict between science and religion therefore has nothing to do with science and religion as such but rather with the

ideological influence of naturalism. Indeed, postnaturalist narratives argue that recent developments in natural-scientific theory actually help us comprehend certain spiritual realities in a more profound manner than ever before.

Thomas Nagel has elaborated a prominent yet controversial (Ferguson; Leiter and Wesiberg) postnaturalist narrative.⁸ His basic claim is that naturalistic interpreters of modern science have been driven more by fear of religion and a false yearning for pure objectivity than by any close consideration of modern science's actual course. He argues that this strand of ideological naturalism actually foments antiscientific religion by making it seem like science and religion are diametrically opposed. Nagel further claims that most naturalistic attempts to either dissolve or fulfill humanity's religious impulses fail, and therefore suggests that philosophers and scientists should be more open to learning from religious worldviews. Nagel himself is not religious but contends that religion's appreciation of teleology points us in the right direction.

There are many resonances between the postnaturalist narrative and the Bahá'í approach to science and religion. For one, the Bahá'í teachings explicitly critique the "dogmatic materialism" that claims "to be the

⁷ The work of Toft, Philpott, and Shah makes this mistake.

⁸ Other postnaturalist narratives include Hans Jonas, Pim van Lommell, Bernard d'Espagnat, David Bohm, and Henry Stapp.

voice of ‘science’” and “seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness” (Bahá'í International Community, *Century of Light* 136). Furthermore, the teachings confirm the legitimacy of the modern scientific enterprise and state that religious insights must be constantly examined in the light of scientific findings. As Shoghi Effendi explained to a young Bahá'í,

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth. (cited in Research Department of the Universal House of Justice)

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í teachings go deeper into the relationship between science and religion than most postnaturalist narratives do, as the latter tend to downplay the importance of religion as a distinct system of knowledge and practice and argue simply that religious ideas ought to be amplified by modern scientific findings. The Bahá'í teachings alternately suggest that religion has a unique role

to play in generating knowledge and contributing to the process of civilization building. It is therefore not enough to abandon naturalism and begin correlating natural-scientific findings with religious beliefs. Rather, the Bahá'í teachings explain that we must approach science and religion as “two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances” (The Universal House of Justice, “A Letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, Dated 2 March, 2013”).

THE CONSTRUCT NARRATIVE

Construct narratives explore how the concept of “religion in general”—which is to say religion as a general phenomenon that is variously instantiated throughout history and around the world—was developed by modern Western thinkers. The basic question is whether this concept of religion is an illusion, a discovery, the mask of a political agenda, or a mix of all three. Most construct narratives are quite critical of the concept of “religion” and argue that it was shaped by a variety of missionary, colonial, and Western-centric endeavors.

In this vein, Brent Nongbri locates the construction of a general concept of religion within the post-Reformation fragmentation of European Christianity. Following the European Wars of Religion, the idea arose “that different religions stand in tension” with one another and offer “competing

ways to salvation” (86). This concept of religion was used to account for the great cultural and spiritual diversity that early modern Europeans were encountering throughout the world. It also helped found Western laws concerning religious freedom and the separation of religion and state. Unfortunately, this conflict-based concept of religion does not align with the reality of many premodern and non-Western societies. Nongbri cites numerous historical examples to support this claim. In this way, he argues that the construction of a general concept of religion was little more than a “projection of Christian disunity onto the world” (cited in Harrison 174). He then recommends that we abandon the concept of religion and begin approaching premodern and non-Western cultures through a more holistic lens in which deity(s), prayer, rites, and beliefs are simply part of a people’s sociocultural setting.

Not all construct narratives proceed so critically. For example, Guy Stroumsa argues that the concept of “religion in general” was one of the most important discoveries of the early modern period. He supports his claim by showing how the concept arose as Europeans encountered previously unknown (e.g., Native American) and highly advanced (e.g., Chinese) cultural systems, learned to read a variety of ancient texts through new philological methods, and questioned Christianity’s moral superiority after many years of violent sectarian struggle. Of course, early modern thinkers

did not always conceptualize religion properly, often even pursuing their inquiries within a narrow biblical lens. Nevertheless, by developing a general concept of religion, they provided us with an essential tool for thinking about aspects of human culture that reference the divine.⁹

The Bahá’í teachings affirm certain aspects of both strands of the construct narrative framework. On the critical side, Bahá’ís acknowledge the “confusion that surrounds virtually every aspect of the subject of religion” and are particularly critical of the misguided idea “that by ‘religion’ is intended the multitude of sects currently in existence” (Bahá’í International Community, “One Common Faith” 9). In fact, the situation has become so dire that Bahá’ís believe that humanity must “recast the whole conception of religion” (11). At the same time, aligning more with the views advanced by Stroumsa, the Bahá’í teachings also present the emergence of a general concept of religion as evidence of our growing consciousness of the oneness of humankind. In this light, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes humanity’s recognition of the “unity of religion” as “the corner-stone” of

9 Other significant construct narratives, some more critically inclined than others, include Talal Asad (*Genealogies of Religion and Formations of the Secular*), Daniel Dubuisson, Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair, Jason Josephson, Richard King, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Peter van der Veer.

our rapidly emerging world civilization (cited in Shoghi Effendi 38–39). Of course, Western ideas concerning the unity of religion are quite distant from those presented in the Bahá'í teachings. Nevertheless, the development of such concepts has helped humanity advance its consciousness of the oneness of humankind. The task is not therefore to simply critique humanity's problematic notions of "religion," as many construct narratives do, but rather to work to remold and improve them.

THE PERENNIAL NARRATIVE

The perennial narrative claims that all the world's religions exhibit common characteristics. For many readers, the word "perennial" will immediately bring to mind the idea of *philosophia perennis*, or perennial philosophy, which holds that all religions are partial manifestations of a higher mystical path. This line of thought, which reaches back into Christian and Islamic engagements with Neoplatonic philosophy, was prominently articulated in the modern West by Aldous Huxley and H. P. Blavatsky and played a major role in shaping the idea of being "spiritual but not religious" (Fuller). However, a wider range of thought falls within the perennial narrative frame. Some thinkers, for example, see perennial patterns in the rise and fall of religious civilizations (Khaldún; Toynbee), while others highlight the perennial religious dynamics that characterize human existence (Kierkegaard;

Michalski; Wallace). Others still argue that the world's diverse religious traditions all interact with the same spiritual reality but represent it differently.

John Hick exhibits this line of perennial thinking well. His basic claim is that each of the world's religions arises as some segment of humanity responds to transcendence in a culturally and historically specific manner. Within these responses, certain ideas universally appear. However, different traditions also generate unique insights that others do not possess. He bases his thinking on the idea that transcendence cannot be exhausted by any single framework or tradition and must therefore be approached in a multiplicity of ways.

The Bahá'í Writings affirm the perennial dimensions of religious history. For example, Bahá'u'lláh describes His own Message as the most recent expression of "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 85), while 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "[t]he Prophets and Manifestations of God bring always the same teaching" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 57). Bahá'u'lláh then explains that "[t]he difference between the ordinances under which [different cultures and religious traditions] abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose" (*Proclamation* 114). He adds that

different religious ideas concerning, say, the origin of the creation, arise “by reason of the divergences in men’s thoughts and opinions” but complement one another nonetheless (*Tablets* 140). These points made, the Bahá’í Writings transcend the perennial narrative lens by locating religious diversity within a broader evolutionary perspective. This brings us to the seventh and final narrative framework, which I describe as “developmental.”

THE DEVELOPMENTAL NARRATIVE

Developmental narratives claim that religion has evolved in a somewhat progressive manner. This idea was first advanced to explain how all other traditions were steps on a teleological ladder that culminated in Western Christianity. Hegel’s philosophy of religion is the apotheosis of this perspective (*Lectures*). Although one still encounters such claims today (e.g., Stark, *Discovering God*), most contemporary developmental narratives describe the historical development of religion in a more globally nuanced manner.

Robert Bellah’s recent work, *Religion in Human Evolution*, offers a robust example of this approach. He argues that religion has historically stimulated new cognitive capacities and been transformed by their emergence. This process began when religion helped launch the process of cultural evolution by establishing sacred rituals. Without ritual, early humans could not generate, store, or

disseminate knowledge, as they lacked complex narrative language and external storing technologies, such as writing. Religion later helped awaken the next stage of cognitive evolution by establishing sacred myth. Myth helped humanity expand the intricacy, breadth, and temporal extension of its knowledge and led to the emergence of more complex and powerful civilizations. A similar pattern appeared during the axial age; marginal prophets arose and critiqued the mythological religious order. Their teachings were generally recorded in sacred texts and used by new communities to launch the traditions of philosophical, scientific, and theological inquiry that we still interact with today. Although Bellah halts at the axial age, he leaves open the possibility of extending his development narrative into the modern epoch.

The Bahá’í teachings affirm the idea that the historical development of religion stimulated the gradual “awakening of humankind to its capacities and responsibilities” (Bahá’í International Community, “One Common Faith” 22). The Bahá’í teachings also explain that religion operated differently during earlier phases of history. Consider the following statement made by Bahá’u’lláh:

That no records concerning [early Prophets] are now available, should be attributed to their extreme remoteness, as well as to the vast changes which the earth hath undergone since their time.

Moreover such forms and modes of writing as are now current amongst men were unknown to the generations that were before Adam. There was even a time when men were wholly ignorant of the art of writing, and had adopted a system entirely different from the one which they now use. . . . Witness, therefore, how numerous and far-reaching have been the changes in language, speech, and writing since the days of Adam. How much greater must have been the changes before Him! (*Gleanings* 172–73)

Nevertheless, instead of simply describing the external dynamics of religion's development, as Bellah does, the Bahá'í teachings root the historical development of religion in the periodic coming of a Manifestation of God. The Manifestations of God are described as the "spiritual Educators of history" and "the animating forces in the rise of the civilizations through which consciousness has flowered" (Bahá'í International Community, "One Common Faith" 34). Each Manifestation "must needs vouchsafe to the peoples of His day a measure of divine guidance ampler than any which a preceding and less receptive age could have received or appreciated" (Shoghi Effendi 102). This dynamic is, from a Bahá'í perspective, the heart of the developmental logic that animates the history of religion.

COHERENCE AND FURTHER INQUIRY

After considering the seven narrative frameworks presented previously, many readers will be inclined to ask which one is correct, or at least which coheres most explicitly with the Bahá'í teachings. Suffice it to say, my purpose is to show that each narrative offers distinct insights that resonate with the Bahá'í teachings in specific ways. We cannot therefore say that one, and only one, narrative is correct and/or aligns with the Bahá'í teachings. That said, it is not adequate to simply acknowledge this point and move on. We must rather strive to understand how the insights each narrative offers hang together as a coherent whole, else we falsely identify contradictions or inconsistencies in the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, as Lample explains, "[i]n attempting to understand the Bahá'í teachings, especially in cases where passages appear incomplete or contradictory or where it appears that the Central Figures change their views, it is necessary to seek the meaning of statements in the Writings as an integrated and progressively unfolding whole" (40).

Unfortunately, it is not possible to accomplish this task in a few concluding remarks. As an initial suggestion, though, it may be worth noting that I have found it helpful to approach the various processes and dynamics that each narrative framework identifies as facets of religion's broader developmental trajectory. The idea here is that, as part of religion's historical

development, certain aspects of earlier religious epochs are rightfully left behind, while others are problematically abandoned and ought to be revisited; that the distinctive forces of modernity facilitate religion's transformation, not necessarily its outright marginalization and decline; that recent developments in natural science help us understand spiritual phenomena in a more profound manner; that a problematic concept of religion has taken hold of modern Western discourse and skewed our perceptions of both historical and contemporary religious dynamics; and that many religious patterns and ideas perennially appear in different contexts and settings. Approaching the academic study of religion in this manner helps us see how, in the aggregate, contemporary thought is gradually approaching the broader vision of religion provided by the Bahá'í teachings. Certainly, much more remains to be done before this claim can be substantiated. However, I argue that we can plausibly envision how a community of inquirers might go about doing so.

In this light, consider how each narrative highlights a dynamic of religious change that both academic researchers and the Bahá'í teachings identify. For example, Daniel Dennett grounds his analysis of the subtractive dynamics of religious history in the idea that religious leaders encourage humanity to adopt increasingly abstract notions of divinity in order to protect their beliefs from falsification. Of course, the Bahá'í teachings

do not endorse Dennett's ultimate conclusions. Yet, once we reinterpret his work as an attempt to describe one fact of religion's broader developmental trajectory, we find many insights in his analyses. Thus, for example, Dennett helps us understand Bahá'u'lláh's descriptions of how religious leaders often precipitate periods of religious decline by presenting their own limited theological constructions as divine truth. He also advances our understanding of the roots of superstition and the way scientific investigation, broadly construed, purifies our habits of thought. Now, imagine engaging the work of tens, or even hundreds, of thinkers who work within the subtraction narrative framework in this way, as well as the bodies of research that are being pursued within the six other narrative lenses. Clearly our understanding of the various facets of religious history would rapidly evolve, as would our ability to effectively participate in the associated academic discourses. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, our knowledge that all these dynamics find their place within the kind of broader developmental trajectory that the Bahá'í teachings describe would help us weave the diverse insights contemporary academics are advancing into a uniquely coherent whole. The claim, then, is not that we ought to force the academic study of religion to fit the developmental vision provided by the Bahá'í teachings, but rather that drawing on the Bahá'í teachings could help us gradually articulate a novel framework for scientific investigation.

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