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PTH 90: Bahá'í Theology

Dates: June 5 – Aug. 27, 2019

Faculty: Mikhail Sergeev and Ian Kluge (see bios at the end)

Course Description:

This course on Bahá'í theology (the study of God and creation and of the relationship between them) provides an in-depth study of many of the fundamental spiritual teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The units are organized around a series of questions we all ask from time to time:

- How do I know (epistemology, or the study of the nature and grounds of knowledge)?
- What is the structure of reality (ontology, or the study of the nature and relations of being)?
- Where do I come from (creation and evolution)?
- Who am I (what is human nature)?
- Whom can I trust to guide me (the nature of Manifestations of God and their revelations)?
- What is freedom and what are the consequences (free will, reward, punishment)?
- Where are we going (an ever-advancing species and our eternal souls)?
- What is expected of us (our religious lives)?
- What difference does it make (theology in action)?

This course is ideal for anyone who wants to delve more deeply into the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

Learning Objectives:

- To become familiar with major theological issues, common approaches to them, and the Bahá'í principles relevant to them.
- To acquire the ability to explain and discuss the Bahá'í approaches to theological questions in meaningful conversations and in situations of public discourse.
- To acquire a new appreciation and understanding of the Bahá'í revelation.
- To demonstrate the above in discussion postings to each unit, reflection papers, and a final course project.

Course Expectations:

- This course is divided into one-week (or less) sessions beginning with an orientation unit and ending with a unit for review and summary. All units include video presentations, readings, and online discussion among course participants. The course has been structured so that it typically requires an estimated 6 hours per week of readings and graded discussion, in addition to the videos and a graded weekly essay. A final project or paper is expected.
- Because the requirements of colleges and universities differ widely, the course can be taken at one of three different levels:
- PTH 190: The 100-level requirements are suitable for many freshmen (first-year) students. In addition to the readings and videos, the student is expected to complete at least two postings in the discussion forum of each unit, one of which should be at least 300 words in length and reflective of what the student has learned. The final project is a paper of at least 5 pages (exclusive of bibliography) or a PowerPoint and recorded presentation to the course.
- PTH 390: The 300-level requirements are suitable for juniors and seniors or students at more rigorous universities. In addition to the readings and videos, the student is expected to complete at least two postings in the graded discussion form of each unit, one of which should be substantive, and a 500 to 750-word (2-3 page) graded essay each unit. The final project is a paper of at least 10 pages (exclusive

of bibliography) or equivalent.

- PTH 590: The 500-level requirements are suitable for Master's degree students. In addition to the readings and videos, the student is expected to complete at least two postings in the graded discussion form of each unit, one of which should be substantive, and a 500 to 750-word (2-3 page) graded essay each unit. The final project is a research paper of at least 15 pages (exclusive of bibliography) or equivalent.
- Additional requirements may be requested by the credit-grading institution.

Course Readings:

Julio Savi, *Eternal Quest for God: An Introduction to the Divine Philosophy of Abdu'l-Baha*, (George Ronald, 1989), available at Bahá'í Library Online, https://bahai-library.com/savi_eternal_quest_god. This is the primary text for the course.

Each unit will also include a collection of readings from the Bahá'í authoritative texts, links to video talks and lectures, and/or additional supplementary readings for higher level requirements.

Course Discussion:

Your instructor will periodically review your progress in the course and be available to discuss things with you. The following guidelines will help you gain maximum benefit from your participation in the course and will contribute toward a rich and rewarding experience through dialogue with others.

- Complete the readings and activities for each unit. Afterwards, your first posting in the discussion area should make reference to the readings and activities in such a way that your instructor can tell you read the material and engaged in the activities.
- Post at least 2 message replies in the discussion area for each unit/session. Each post should contain substantive comments (i.e., a comment like "oh, that's interesting" is NOT substantive).
- Choose at least 2 different days each session when you will participate in the discussions. We suggest posting at least once within the first few days of the session, with your second post at least two days before the next session begins. By contributing more than one post on different days, you will help the group develop rich ongoing discussions.
- If you post on time (i.e., within the time period of each unit on the course schedule), others will be able to read and respond to your post.
- Keep a course journal to help you track your ideas as you work on your final project.

Preparatory Tasks:

1. Watch the Director's Welcome Video, read about the Technology Requirements of the course, the Technical Assistance we can provide, and our ability to Accommodate Disabilities.
2. Update your personal profile (see instructions in section 4 of the Course Software Tutorial).
3. Tour the course website to get better acquainted with the elements of a course:
 - a. Open and glance through a few of the Unit pages, including the readings and discussion forum.
 - b. Look at the items in the sidebars (columns), especially Local Study Groups and Resources.
 - c. Take a look at the other elements on the course site, especially the instructions in the Reflection and Application Unit, as this will influence your Personal Learning Plan.
4. Read through the Frequently Asked Questions about our Moodle course management system.

Course Schedule:

Unit 1	Introduction	June 5-8, 2019
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SUMMARY: This unit introduces the course to the learners.

DESCRIPTION: In this unit, you will review the unit topics and dates, learn how to use Moodle (our course management system), set up your user profile, begin developing a personal learning plan, and learn how to post and reply in the discussion forums. Learners seeking university credit through their own university or an external agency will be required to design a personal learning plan to meet external standards, including active and ongoing participation in the course discussion forums, readings, assigned activities, and completion of a 5 to 15-page research paper or a project of equivalent complexity.

STUDY MATERIAL: In any religion, theology and theological education involve the study of scriptural and authoritative texts. In the Bahá'í Faith these are the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the works of Shoghi Effendi, and the messages from the Universal House of Justice. This unit provides links to the readings about the lives of the founders, their works, and the circumstances in which they were revealed or presented. Throughout the course various compilations from those texts on selected topics will be provided for the convenience of the students.

The unit study packet also includes introductory articles and videos on Bahá'í theology, the evolution of theology in general, and the difference between theology and religious studies.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To analyze and compare the Bahá'í approach to theology and scripture with other religious traditions.

Unit 2 How do I Know? Epistemology June 9-15

SUMMARY: This unit covers epistemology, or how we know things.

DESCRIPTION: Unlike the scriptures of other faiths, the Bahá'í Writings have a great deal to say about epistemology, some of it surprisingly detailed and technical in nature. They discuss such issues as the criteria for evaluating knowledge, limits of knowledge and acquiring knowledge. Another important epistemological issue concerns reason and the role of reason. The Writings also have much to say about the non-discursive modes of knowing and thinking, which relate to a vital topic in Bahá'í epistemology, such as the human heart.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 1, pp. 1-21; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To summarize the Bahá'í epistemological concepts and analyze their various theological and philosophical implications.

Unit 3 What is the Structure of Reality? Ontology June 16-22

SUMMARY: This unit asks what the structure of reality is, otherwise known as ontology. We look at the overall view of reality as revealed to us by the Manifestation of God and human science.

DESCRIPTION: In its broadest sense, ontology is the theory of reality. It deals with such issues as: what is real and what quality (ies) make it real? Are there degrees of reality or degrees of existence? How is reality or existence structured, i.e. how are the different aspects of reality related to each other? What is the nature of existence or reality? Ontology is so important to understanding religion because our theory of reality forms the framework from which all other teachings get their meaning and by which they are justified. It forms the ground rules or constitution by which all religious teachings are judged.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 3, pp. 29-70; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To describe the Bahá'í concept of reality (ontology) and analyze its implications for relations with other religious and secular forms of ontological thinking.

Unit 4 Where do I Come From? Creation and Evolution June 23-29

SUMMARY: This unit asks, "Where do I come from?" from the two perspectives of divine revelation and human science.

DESCRIPTION: This unit focuses on humankind's place in the divinely established cosmic order and the origin and evolution of the human race on earth, or, in physical reality. In the process of explaining these issues, Bahá'í teachings also cover a wide range of related topics such as the difference between the accepted concept of human evolution and the Bahá'í concept, the "chain of being," the difference between 'emanation' and 'manifestation,' the nature of physical creation and the purpose of the spirit's appearance in the body. In other words, the Bahá'í teachings about humankind also provide the philosophical background information and reasoning for these beliefs.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read: Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 4, pp. 71-83; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To describe the Bahá'í teachings about human origin and evolution and analyze their implications for relations with other religions and understanding human history.

Unit 5 Who am I? Human Nature June 30-July 6

SUMMARY: This unit covers Bahá'í philosophy of human nature that outlines what constitutes our humanity, both at the species and individual level.

DESCRIPTION: The identity discussed in this unit is not our unique personal identity with its history and 'quirks' but rather our philosophical identity, our nature and make up as human beings in general. Technically this field is known as 'philosophical anthropology' or 'theory of man.' This subject deals with how we are constituted as human beings regardless of time, place, culture, and outward circumstances. It shows us what is universal in all human beings and thereby provides the foundation for all ethical, social, legal, economic, and political philosophy. Problems and/or inconsistencies in the 'theory of man' inevitably show up as difficulties in our ethical, social, legal, economic, and political lives.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read: Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 5, pp. 84-99; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To explain the Bahá'í concept of human nature and analyze its implications for personal, family, and social developments.

Unit 6 Who Can I Trust to Guide Me? Manifestation and Revelation July 7-13

SUMMARY: This unit covers the primacy of the Manifestation as an Educator, and Bahá'u'lláh as the Primal Educator in the scope of Bahá'í Theology.

DESCRIPTION: The inherent limitations of human knowledge inevitably lead to the issue of where we can find reliable knowledge and guidance pertaining to the nature and structure of reality; the questions of moral rights, wrongs, and obligations; the issues of governance and justice in the socio-political order; the problems of personal salvation or how to attain harmony with God's will; the mysteries of life after death, and prayer. According to Bahá'í teachings, the Divine Manifestations are the only reliable source of guidance for humanity, especially in spiritual and social matters.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Chs. 2, 6, pp. 22-28; 100-114; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To summarize the Bahá'í concept of Divine Manifestation and analyze its implications for spiritual and social change.

Unit 7 What is Freedom? Free Will, Reward, & Punishment July 14-20

SUMMARY: This unit covers the interpretation of freedom in the light of divine revelation and the consequences of making choices.

DESCRIPTION: Freedom is a multifaceted concept. It may denote spiritual freedom to accept or reject the Divine grace; personal freedom or human rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" social freedom of association, peaceful demonstration, and travel; economic freedom to initiative and entrepreneurship; political liberty to free and fair elections, and so on. The idea of freedom could also be used as a euphemism for moral laxity and even perversion. Bahá'í teachings advocate high spiritual standards regarding the complex notion of liberty or personal freedom.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 7, pp. 115-137; plus study the unit learning packet.

TERM PAPER: A 1-page outline of the paper (title, 1-paragraph summary, 5 or 6 major points, and a list of at least five sources) should be submitted by July 15.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To describe the Bahá'í concept of free will and analyze its implications for relations with the ideas of destiny/fate, predestination, foreknowledge, and retribution.

Unit 8 Where are We Going? Ever-Advancing Species and Soul July 21-27

SUMMARY: This unit covers the purpose and developmental process of human existence, both collective and individual.

DESCRIPTION: This unit focuses specifically on our ultimate spiritual destiny, which is our evolutionary journey through the next world or "celestial habitation." In order to help us better understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the afterlife, 'Abdu'lBahá prepares us with a number of proofs for the immortality of the human rational soul or

human spirit. We learn that the soul is the “substance” (meaning ‘essence’) of the body, and therefore, the body is an accidental and perishable effect or attribute of the soul. The soul or spirit has its own powers; it does not enter or leave the body since such actions only apply to material things. Nor is the mind, as the power of the spirit, to be identified with the body.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 8, pp. 138-178; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To summarize the Bahá'í concepts of afterlife and the immortality of human spirit and analyze their implications for relations with other religions' doctrines of reincarnation and bodily resurrection.

Unit 9 What is Expected of Me? Religious Life July 28-Aug. 3

SUMMARY: This unit covers the expectations based on the purpose and development process of human existence.

DESCRIPTION: In this unit we explore the practical consequences of various Bahá'í teachings we have discussed so far. For instance, the existence of a non-material, supra-natural realm forms the foundation for belief in the non-material and immortal human soul, and that in turn suggests that humans are not merely natural beings but have a 'super-natural' or 'supra-natural' destiny as souls in a spiritual realm. To fully actualize the potentials of our immortality requires certain attitudes and conduct in regards to ourselves, to other individuals, to humankind as a whole. The Writings offer enormous amounts of material on this, much of which often overlaps vis-à-vis self, others and world.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Ch. 9, pp. 179-204; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To describe the Bahá'í concept of individual and collective action and analyze its implications for relations with other religious and secular movements in history.

Unit 10 What Difference Does it Make? Theology in Action Aug. 4-10

SUMMARY: This unit explores the adoption of the Bahá'í world view and whether its actualization results in happier, healthier, more socially productive and more spiritually minded human beings.

DESCRIPTION: In the final phase of this course we will reflect on the value of what we have covered. How will it make a difference to us and to society? How does an understanding and adoption of a Bahá'í worldview lead to a happier, healthier, more just, more creative and productive individuals and societies? How do these benefits play out amidst a disintegrating old-world order and a rising new one? Of the many possible answers, we will present some of our own, with the assumption that a personal commitment to Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation for our age is the prerequisite for all other developments in our personal faith and with it, our character.

STUDY MATERIAL: Read Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, Chs. 10, 11, pp. 205-235; plus study the unit learning packet.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To explain the Bahá'í concept of spiritual transformation and analyze its implications for building morally strong individuals, happy and healthy families, just and peaceful societies.

Unit 11 Reflection and Application of Learning Aug. 11-13

DESCRIPTION: In this unit, we discuss the course in general and the relationship of the various topics to each other and review the learning goals set during Unit 1. Those seeking credit through their local university will complete their final projects (5 to 15-page research paper or equivalent) over the next two weeks and submit them to the lead faculty.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: To review the contents of the course and its implications for one's university work.

Unit 12 Completion of Course Work Aug. 14-27

DESCRIPTION: Two weeks to write a final research paper and wrap up any other work. A 1-page outline of the paper (title, 1-paragraph summary, 5 or 6 major points, and a list of at least three sources) should be submitted by July 15.

Faculty

Lead Faculty: Mikhail Sergeev



Mikhail Sergeev holds his master's degree in religious studies (1993) and a doctorate in philosophy of religion (1997) from Temple University, Philadelphia. He is the author of numerous articles on the history of religion, philosophy and contemporary art that have been published in Russian and American scholarly journals. He is also author and editor of nine books, including *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity and the Bahá'í Faith* (Brill, 2015). Dr. Sergeev teaches history of religions plus philosophy and modern art at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Support Faculty: Ian Kluge



Ian Kluge is a poet, playwright and independent philosophy scholar who has written numerous articles on the philosophical aspects of the Baha'i Writings. Among the topics covered are Nietzsche, Buddhism, Heidegger, Whitehead as well as freedom, relativism, atheism and postmodernism. These have been published in various journals including the *Lights of Irfan* series, *Studies in Baha'i Philosophy*, *The Journal of Baha'i Studies* and presented at Association of Baha'i Studies conferences. Kluge has an M.A. from the University of Alberta, where he also completed his doctoral courses and examinations and wrote his dissertation, "Conrad Aiken's Philosophy of Consciousness."