

# Seven Ways of Looking at Religion

The Major Narratives

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# The Post-Secular Problematic

- Secularization theory became a paradigm in the social sciences and humanities during during the 19th and 20th centuries.
- Secularization theory envisions the modern decline of religion.
- Disrupted during the 1980s.
- How do we think about the changing place of religion in the modern world if not through the lens of secularization?

# Seven Narratives

1. Subtraction

2. Renewal

3. Trans-secular

4. Post-naturalist

5. Construct

6. Perennial

7. Developmental

# 1) Subtraction Narrative

“The so-called ‘major religions’ or ‘universal religions’, far from being the quintessential embodiment of religion, are in fact just so many stages of its abatement and disintegration.... When dealing with religion, what appears to be an advance is actually a retreat.”

- *Marcel Gauchet*

# Subtractivist facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- The Bahá'í Writings do not envision the general marginalization and decline of religion.
- They do suggest that certain aspects of previous religious formations must be abandoned as civilization evolves.

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 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? -Shoghi Effendi, (41)

## 2) Renewal Narrative

“What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”

- *Alasdair MacIntyre*

# Renewalist facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- The Bahá'í Writings confirm that the decline of religion has played a central role in causing many of the problems of the modern world.
- They reject the idea that simply renewing some past religious form can solve the problems of modernity. This can only be accomplished by the coming of a new Manifestation of God.

[R]eligion 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. . . . 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.

-The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*

### 3) Transsecular Narrative

“There is a sense in which the ethical discourse of most modern democracies is secularized.... But secularization in this sense is not a reflection of commitment to *secularism*. It entails neither the denial of theological assumptions nor the expulsion of theological expression from the public sphere.... [It] just means that the age of theocracy is over.”

- *Jeffrey Stout*

# Transsecularist facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- The Bahá'í Writings affirm that humanity is currently proceeding through in age of transition, in which all aspects of its social and spiritual life is being transformed.
- They do not confuse this process of transformation with a general movement toward American-style pluralism.

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

## 4) Postnaturalist Narrative

“There is no real conflict between theistic religion and the scientific theory of evolution. What there is, instead, is conflict between theistic religion and a philosophical gloss or add-on to the scientific doctrine of evolution: the claim that evolution is undirected, unguided, unorchestrated by God (or anyone else).”

- *Alvin Plantinga*

# Postnaturalist facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- The Bahá'í teachings critique the “dogmatic materialism” that claims “to be the voice of ‘science’” and “seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness” (Century of Light 136).
- They also confirm the legitimacy of the modern scientific enterprise and state that religious insights must be constantly examined in the light of scientific findings.

“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.”

-Shoghi Effendi

## 5) Construct Narrative

“All of this raises the question of how and when people came to conceptualize the world as divided between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ in the modern sense, and to think of the religious realm as being divided into distinct religions, the so-called World Religions.”

- *Brent Nongbri*

# Constructivist facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- 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.”
- In fact, the situation has become so dire that Bahá'ís believe that humanity must “recast the whole conception of religion” (One Common Faith, 11).
- At the same time, 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.
- Of course, Western ideas concerning the unity of religion are quite distant from those presented in the Bahá'í teachings. But 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

## 6) Perennial Narrative

“The most highly developed branches of the human family...tend to produce...a curious and definite type of personality.... We meet these persons in the east and the west; in the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest: the finding of a ‘way out’ or a ‘way back’ to some desirable state in which alone they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth.”

- *Evelyn Underhill*

# Perennial facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- 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” (Kitab-i-Aqdas, 85).
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “[t]he Prophets and Manifestations of God bring always the same teaching” (‘Ab- du’l-Bahá in London 57).
- The Bahá'í Writings transcend the perennial narrative lens by locating religious diversity within a broader evolutionary perspective.

## 7) Developmental Narrative

“The progression [of historical religions] is a condition for the arrival of religion at its absolute truth.... These determinate religions are definite stages of the consciousness and knowledge of spirit. They are necessary conditions for the emergence of the true religion, for the authentic consciousness of spirit.”

- *G.W.F. Hegel*

# Developmental facets of the Bahá'í Writings

- 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).
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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)

## Other narratives?

- Post-secular?
- Deconstruction?
- Embodied cognition?
- Cyclical or messianic?
  
- Problematics, methods, theoretical frameworks, and non-academic theological systems are not viable contenders.

# The Question of Truth

1. Competition
2. Heuristic Lenses
3. Synthesis

# A Developmental Synthesis

- As part of a 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 religious history provided by the Bahá'í teachings.

# Thanks!

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