

Religious Cycles:

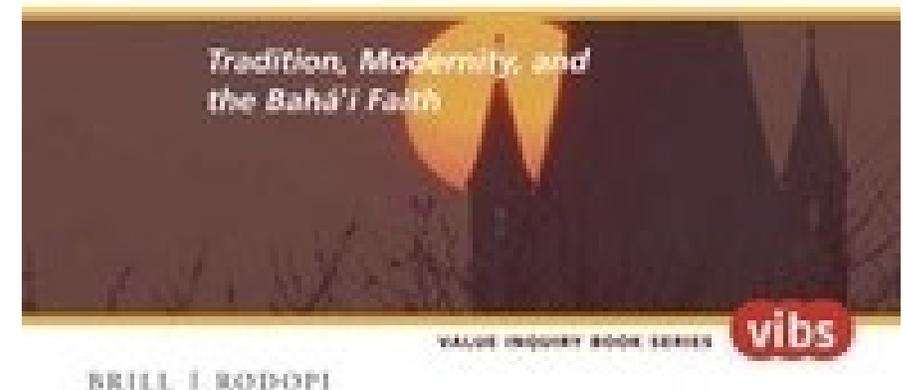
**Tradition,
Modernity, and
the Bahá'í Faith**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

- The Soviet experience was such a tragic and long-lasting social experiment that in order to move forward Russians need an existential closure, a clear comprehension of the origin and meaning of Russian communism.
- Theodore Adorno once noted that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.”
- Is philosophy (that is not barbaric) possible after the Gulag?



Theory of Religious Cycles



SOVIET COMMUNISM

- The Soviet Union was a unique empire in world history.
- A totalitarian political state, it was run by planned state economy and militant atheist ideology (religious movements were suppressed, and their followers persecuted).
- The USSR survived for 75 years and in the second half of the 20th century was joined by other communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Asia (China, North Korea), and Latin America (Cuba).



SOVIET COMMUNISM

- After the collapse of the USSR, four main trends of thought arose in Russia to offer new ideological directions for the country – post-Soviet Marxism, Orthodox Christian philosophy, postmodernism, and globalism.
- Each of those four trends of thought offers its own explanation for the rise and fall of Soviet communism.
- Marxists tend to focus on the positive aspects of Soviet history – the fight for economic and social justice for the people of labor.



SOVIET COMMUNISM

- Nationalist Orthodoxy views communism as a foreign ideology, a social disease that Russia contracted from the decaying Western culture.
- Postmodernists interpret the Soviet experiment as the last totalitarian empire with a “Grand Narrative.”
- Finally, globalists understand the Soviet project as one of the phases in the process of globalization that will eventually lead to the planetary system of governance.



THEORIES OF RELIGION

- In modern times there have been numerous attempts by scholars to theorize about religion. In the 19th century Western thought produced major theories on the subject, which are still debated in American universities as classical illustrations of scholarly work in the field.
- Most of those theories, however, tend to reduce the content of religion to other areas of human activity.



THEORIES OF RELIGION



- My theory of religious cycles does not aim to discover the essence of religion or reduce it to other forms of social activity.
- In my view, any religious system is primarily a semantic structure that creates a net of meanings whose origin is not available to ordinary human beings.
- In my study I abstain from truth claims since they are not a priori verifiable, but instead concentrate on the evolutionary development of religious systems.

THEORY OF RELIGIOUS CYCLES



- In as much as religion generates a semantic field, its most important task is to preserve the true meaning of its original teachings. In order to accomplish this task, religions develop sacred scriptures and sacred traditions.
- The sacred scriptures hold the absolute authority within the community of believers. They are complemented by the sacred tradition whose main purpose is to interpret the primary texts.

THEORY OF RELIGIOUS CYCLES



- Both sacred scriptures and sacred tradition constitute the backbone of any religious system whose development depends on the proper interaction between the two components.
- In the course of its evolution, and independently of its doctrines and practices, a religious system goes through a certain number of stages or phases – early or formative, orthodox, classical, reformist, critical, and post-critical.



THEORY OF RELIGIOUS CYCLES

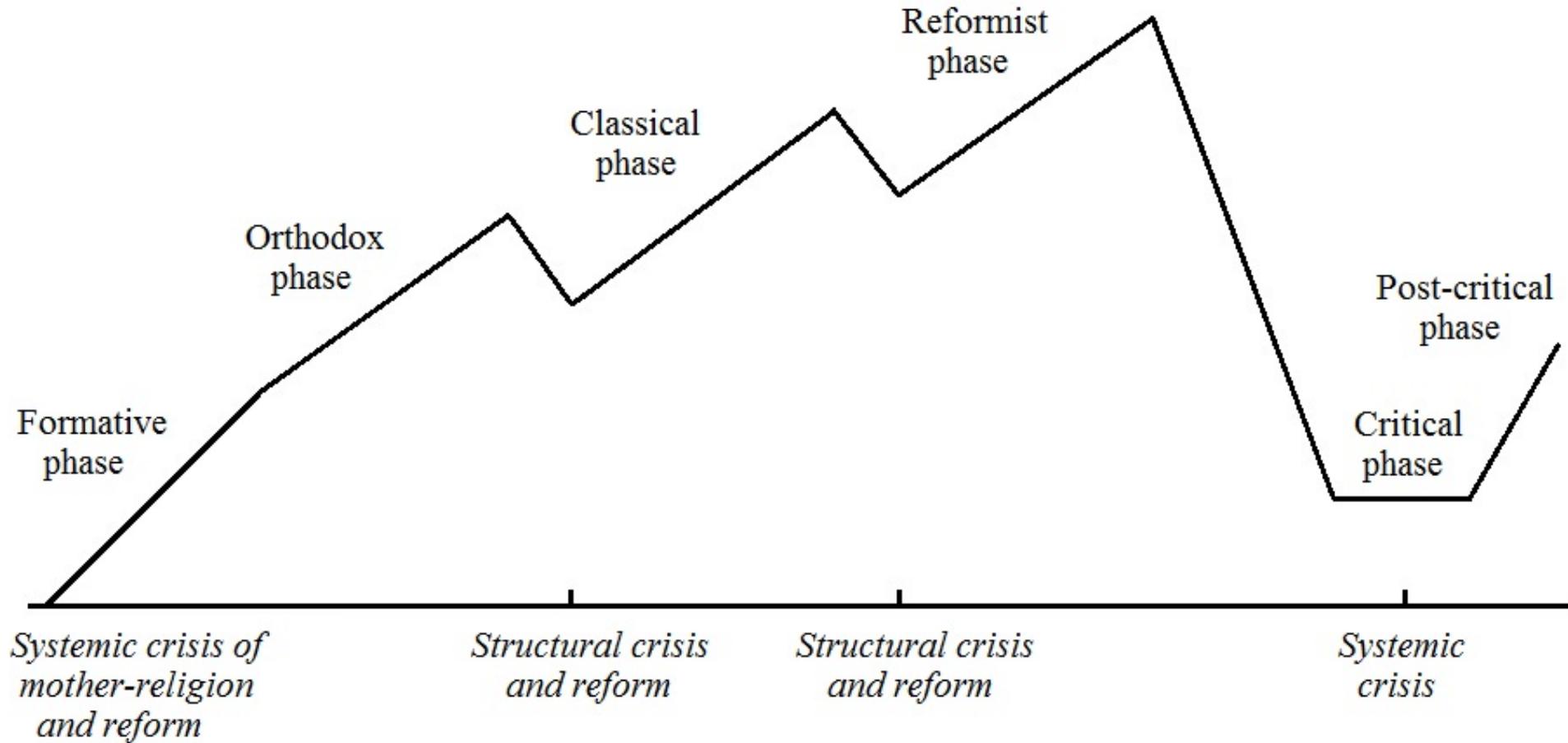
- The early or formative phase in the evolution of religious system contributes to the formation of its scriptural canon and the establishment of its sacred tradition.
- The orthodox phase cements the traditional foundations of religion by fighting heretical movements and their alternative scriptural interpretations.
- The classical phase reformulates sacred tradition by adding new interpretations to the canon.
- Reformists purify tradition from the accumulated interpretations in order to get back to the core of sacred teachings and restore the original faith.
- In post-critical phase religions renew their foundations again by reorganizing their sacred tradition and restoring the authority of primary scriptures.



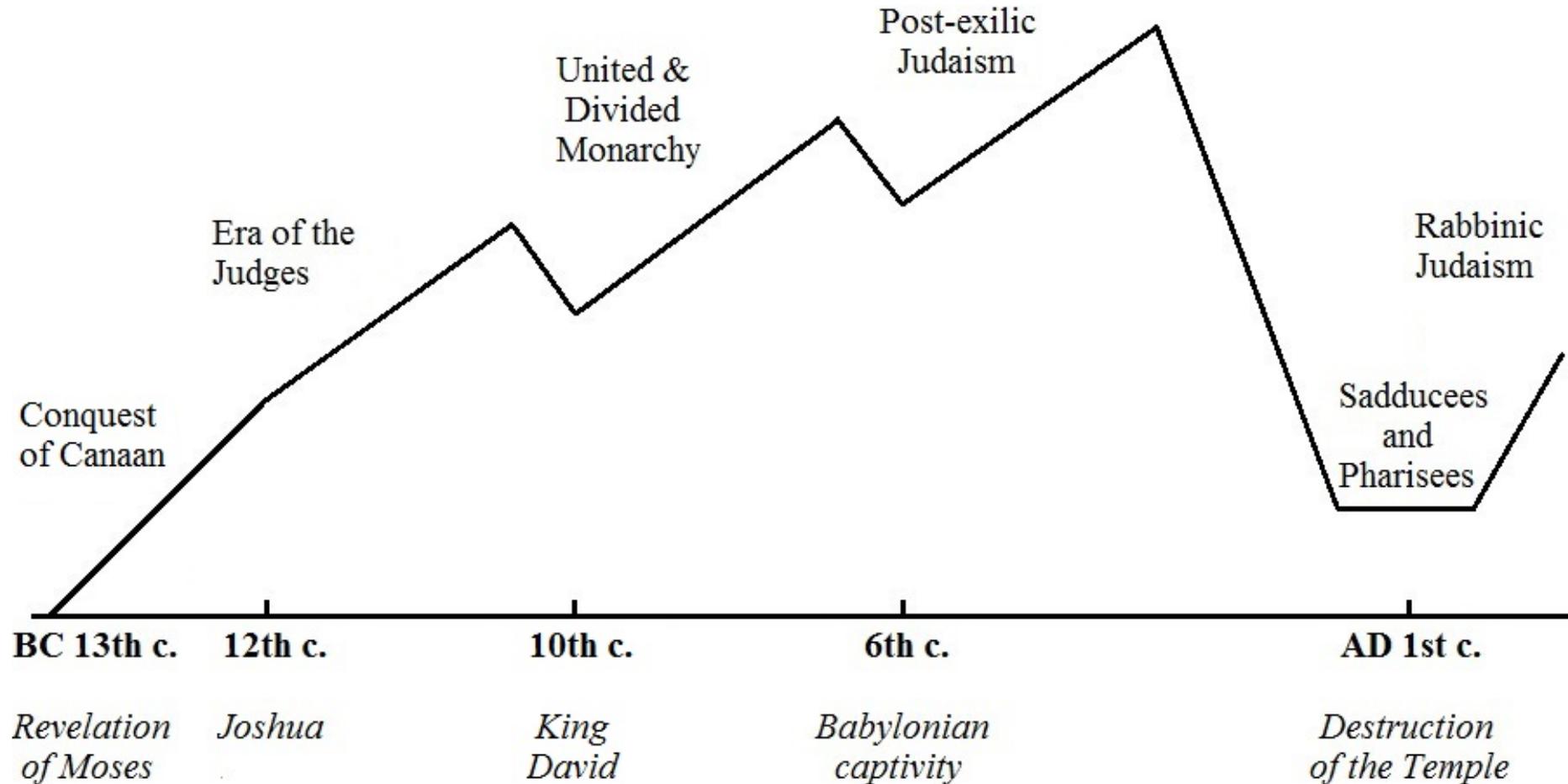
THEORY OF RELIGIOUS CYCLES

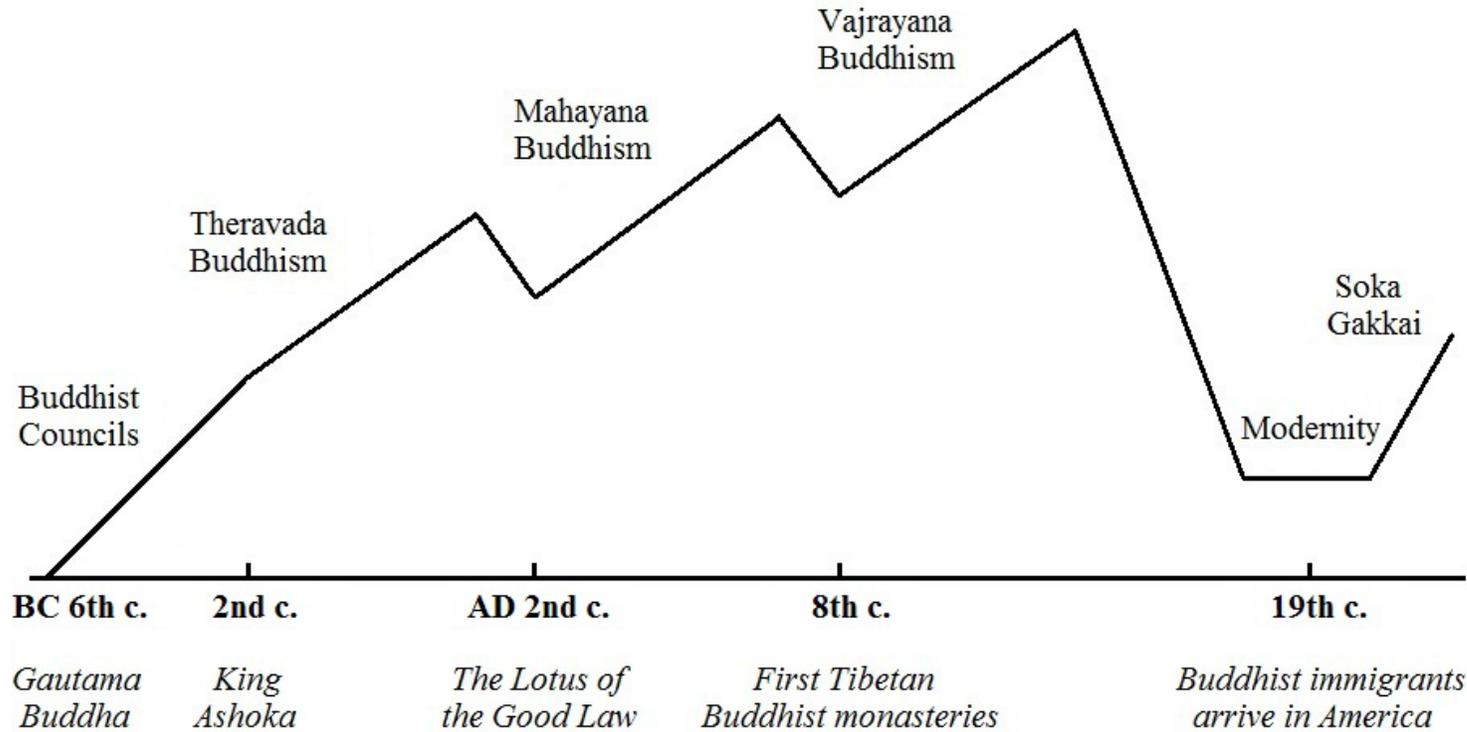
- In the course of its evolution, each religion goes through two types of crises – structural and systemic.
- Structural crises, which challenge sacred tradition, are usually resolved by the appearance of new branches or divisions within the existing religions.
- In contrast to structural crises that question tradition, systemic crisis of religion shakes up the foundation of the system itself, namely its sacred scriptures. Systemic crisis marks a fundamental challenge to religious authority that can be overcome only by the introduction of new religious systems with their own scriptural texts.
- During this critical phase, mother-religions usually produce their offshoots in the form of new religious movements.

STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS CYCLE



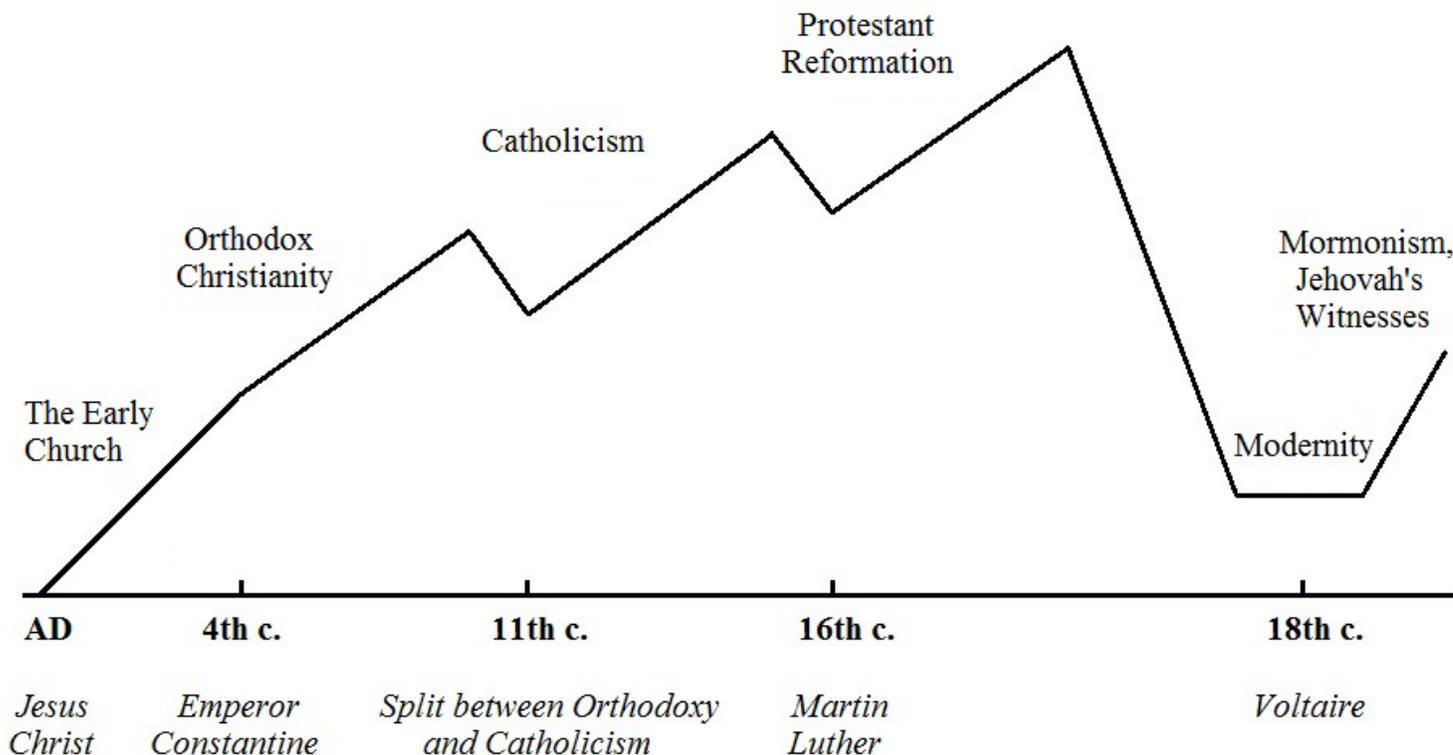
RELIGIOUS CYCLE OF JUDAISM





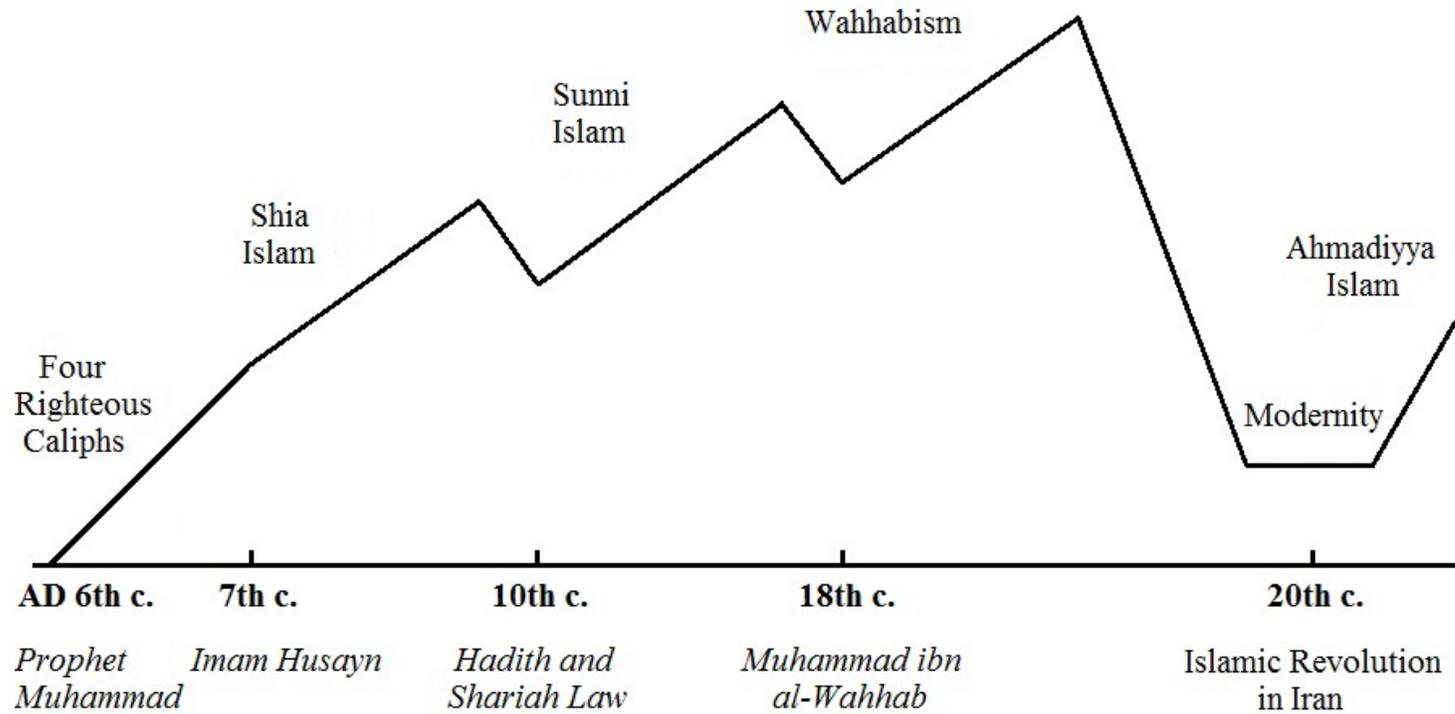
Cycle of Buddhism

- **FORMATIVE PHASE:** Pudgalavāda, Sarvāstivāda (until 9th-10th B.C.)
- **ORTHODOX PHASE:** Theravāda Buddhism (Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos)
- **CLASSICAL PHASE:** Mahāyāna Buddhism (China, Japan)
- **REFORMIST PHASE:** Vajrayana Buddhism (Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan)
- **CRITICAL PHASE:** Modern Buddhism (Japan)
- **POSTCRITICAL PHASE:** Soka Gakkai – Society for the Creation of Values (Japan)



Cycle of Christianity

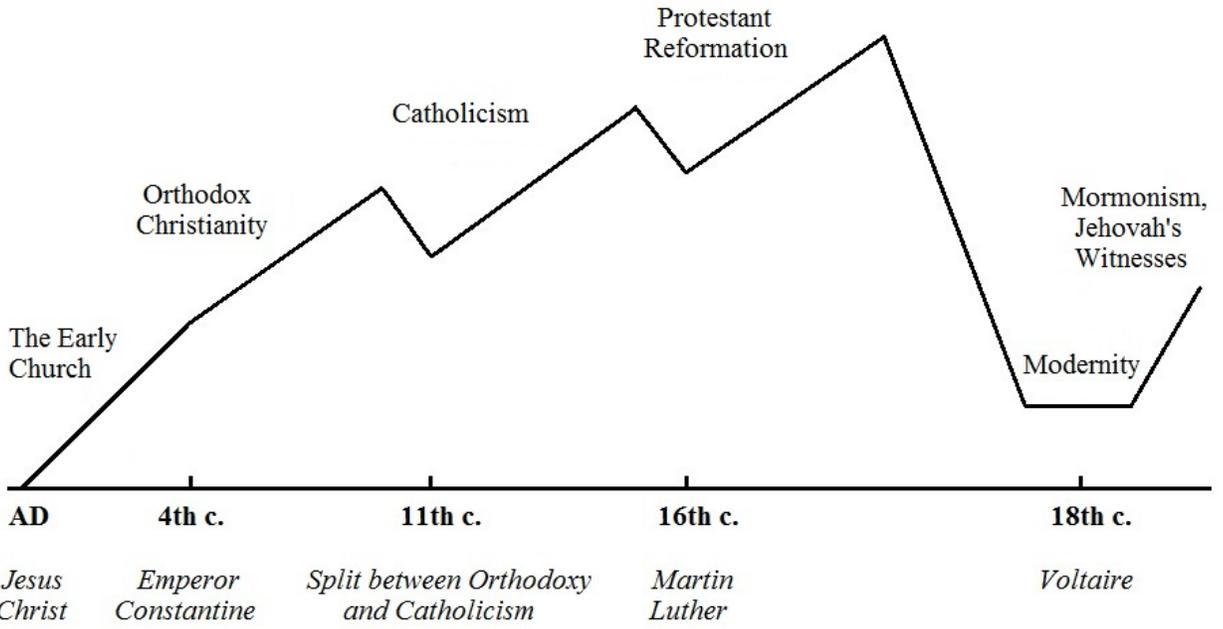
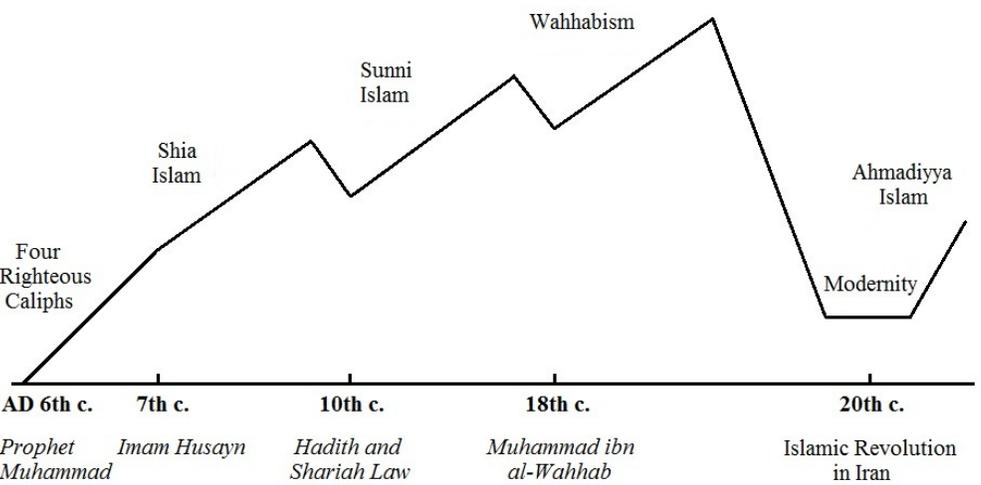
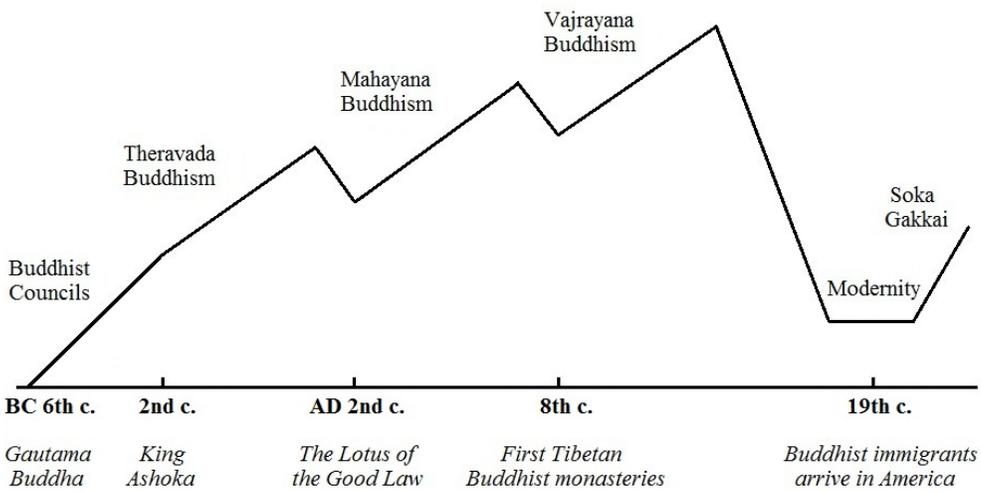
- **FORMATIVE PHASE:** Oriental Orthodoxy (Armenia, Ethiopia, Eritrea)
- **ORTHODOX PHASE:** Eastern Orthodoxy (Greece, Russia, Eastern Europe)
- **CLASSICAL PHASE:** Catholicism (Europe, Canada, Latin America)
- **REFORMIST PHASE:** Protestantism (Germany, England, Scandinavia, America)
- **CRITICAL PHASE:** Deism, Unitarian-Universalism (Europe, USA)
- **POSTCRITICAL PHASE:** Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses (USA, Europe, Latin America)



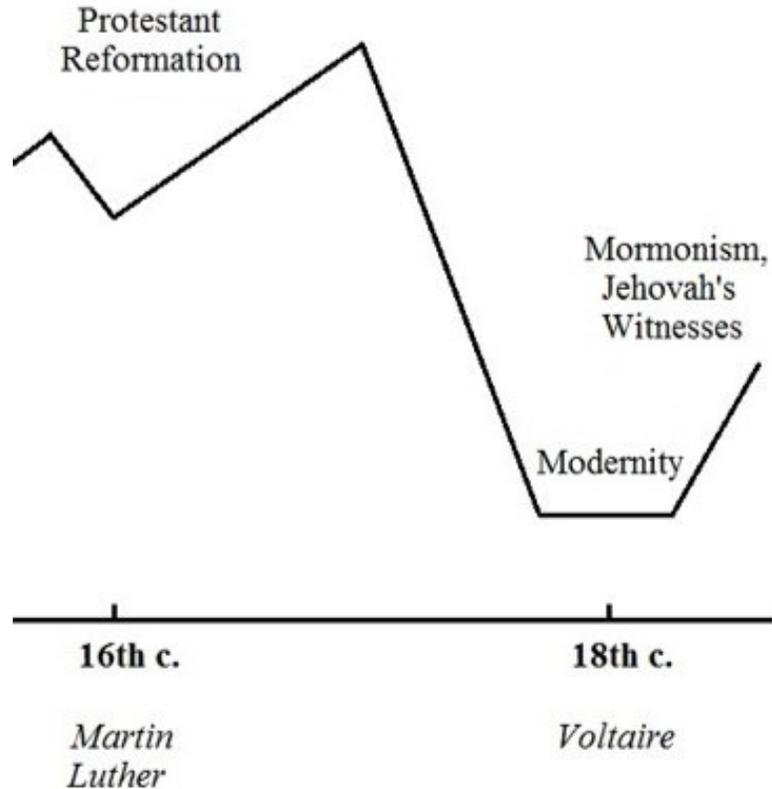
Cycle of Islam

- **FORMATIVE PHASE:**
Kharijite Islam
(North Africa, Oman)
- **ORTHODOX PHASE:**
Shi'ite Islam
(Iran, Iraq, Bahrain)
- **CLASSICAL PHASE:**
Sunni Islam (Indonesia,
Africa, Middle East)
- **REFORMIST PHASE:**
Wahhabi Islam
(Saudi Arabia)
- **CRITICAL PHASE:**
Modern Islam (Turkey)
- **POSTCRITICAL PHASE:**
Ahmadiyya Islam (India)

COMPARATIVE TABLE OF RELIGIOUS CYCLES

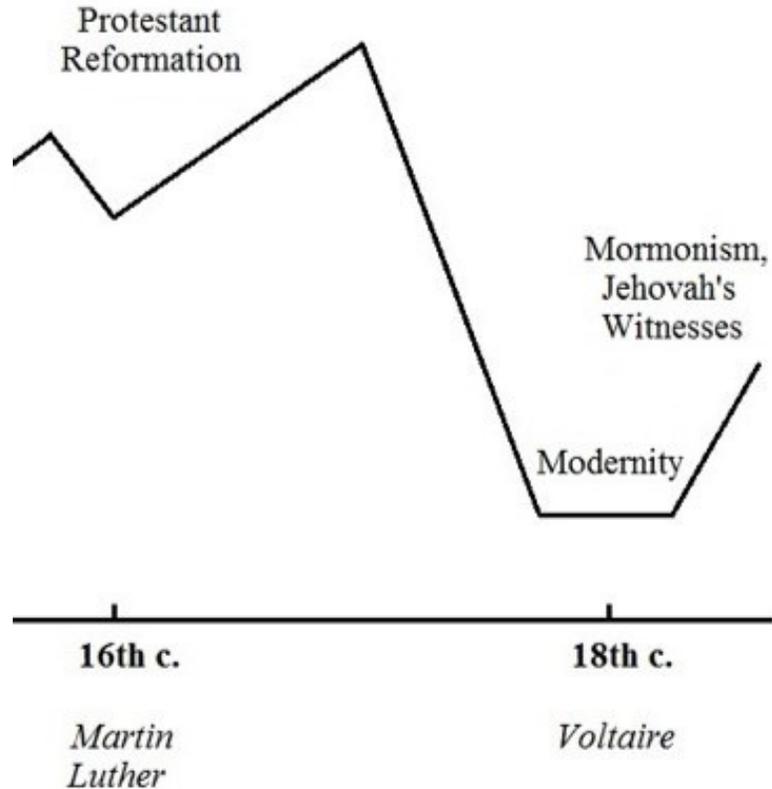


MODERN TIMES



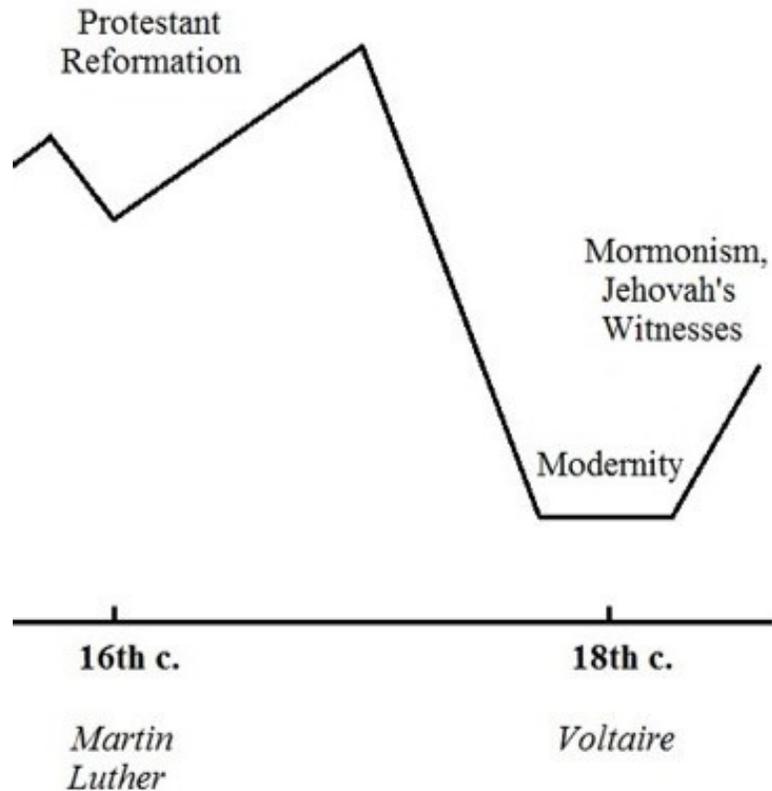
- Modern Times or modernity begins with the European Enlightenment. But what is Enlightenment?
- The spirit of the Enlightenment is characterized by the absolutization of human reason, which is now seen as autonomous and self-sufficient.
- This absolutization of reason runs parallel to various forms of skepticism toward organized religion.

MODERN TIMES



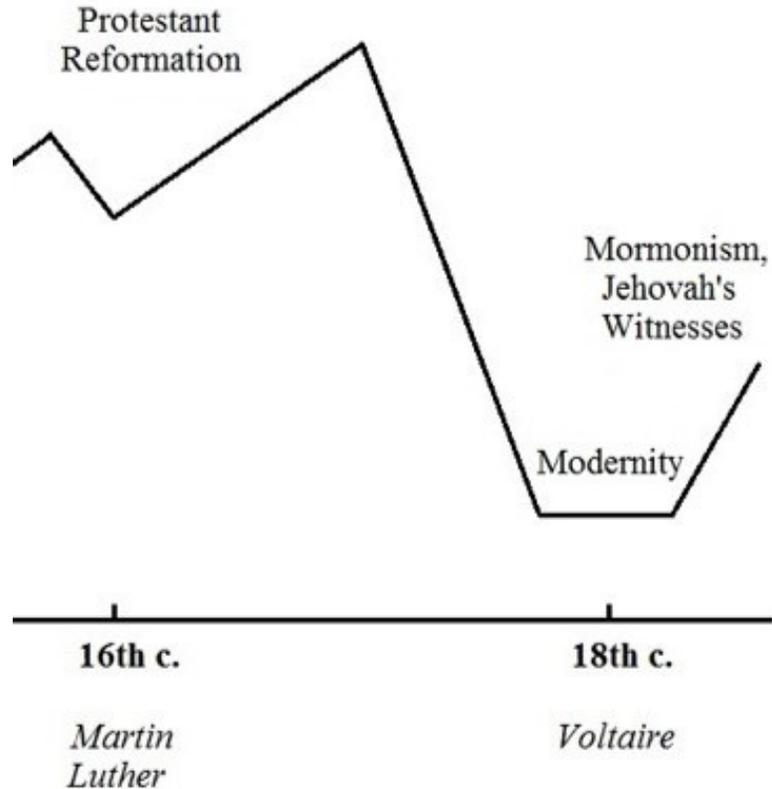
- There were three main trends in Enlightenment thought – the critique of traditional theology, deism, and atheism.
- Biblical criticism, arose as one of the immediate and direct implications of modern rationalism.
- The primacy of reason, which the Enlightenment thinkers asserted and defended, was extended to the domain of revelation.

MODERN TIMES



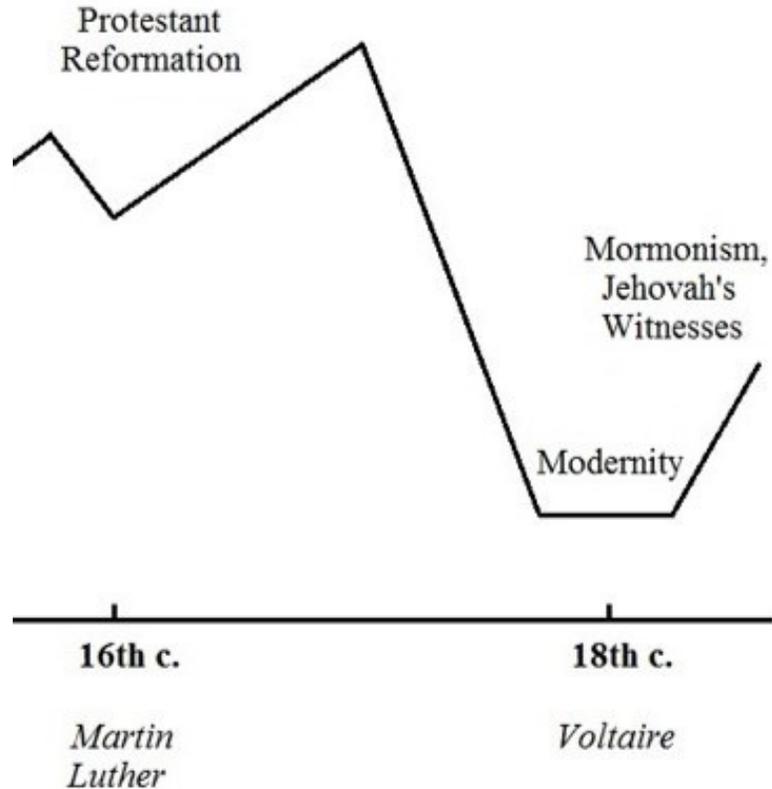
- The deists, who belonged to the second trend of Enlightenment thought, disposed of the very idea of revelation.
- Atheism, which was the third and most radical trend of Enlightenment thought, rejected the belief in God and for that reason denied the credibility of revelation and the authority of any scriptural texts whatsoever, including the Bible.

MODERN TIMES



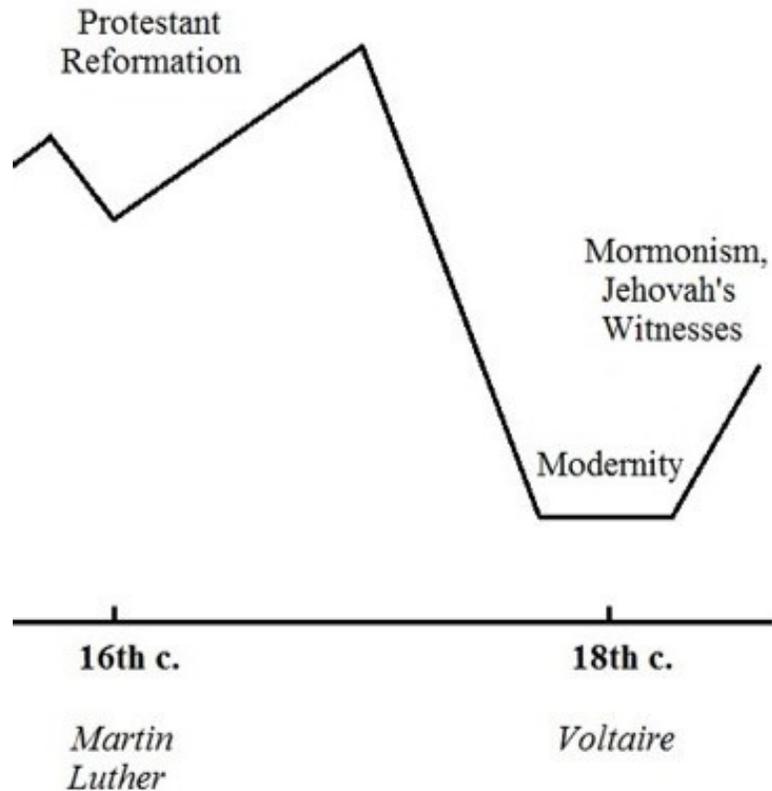
- Biblical critics, deists, and atheists, all for different reasons, were committed to questioning the scriptures, which constitutes the essential feature of the systemic crisis of religion, in this case Christianity.
- Having initiated the critical stage in the evolution of Christian faith, Enlightenment ideology transformed it in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries into a global crisis of religious consciousness.

MODERN TIMES



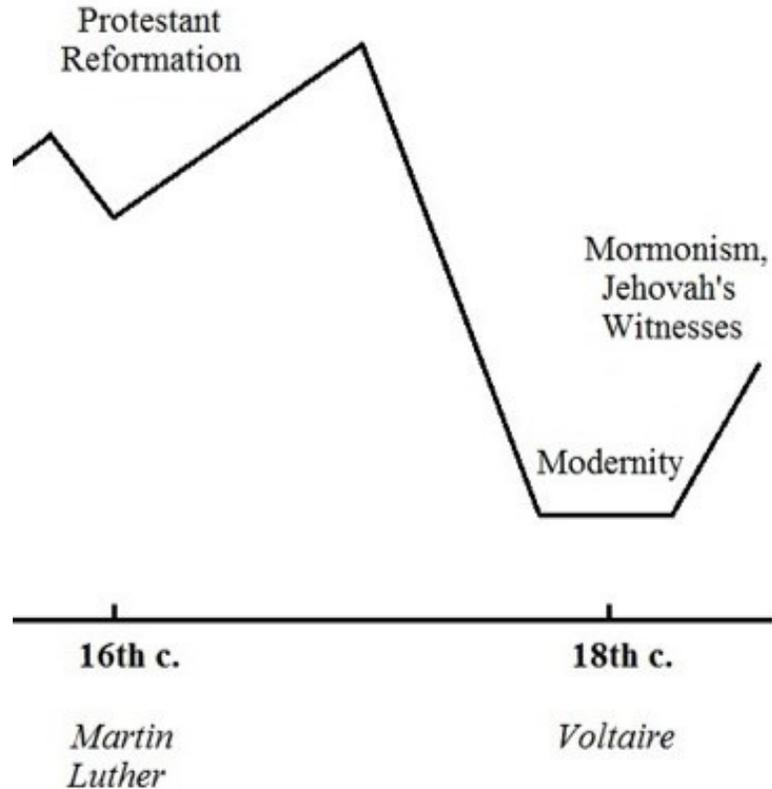
- The rise of the Soviet Union in the 20th century was one manifestation of those radicalist Enlightenment tendencies, which negatively affected the three major world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – that had peacefully coexisted in Russia for centuries.
- The spread of totalitarian states all over the world in the same century also bore witness to the global crisis of religion.

MODERN TIMES



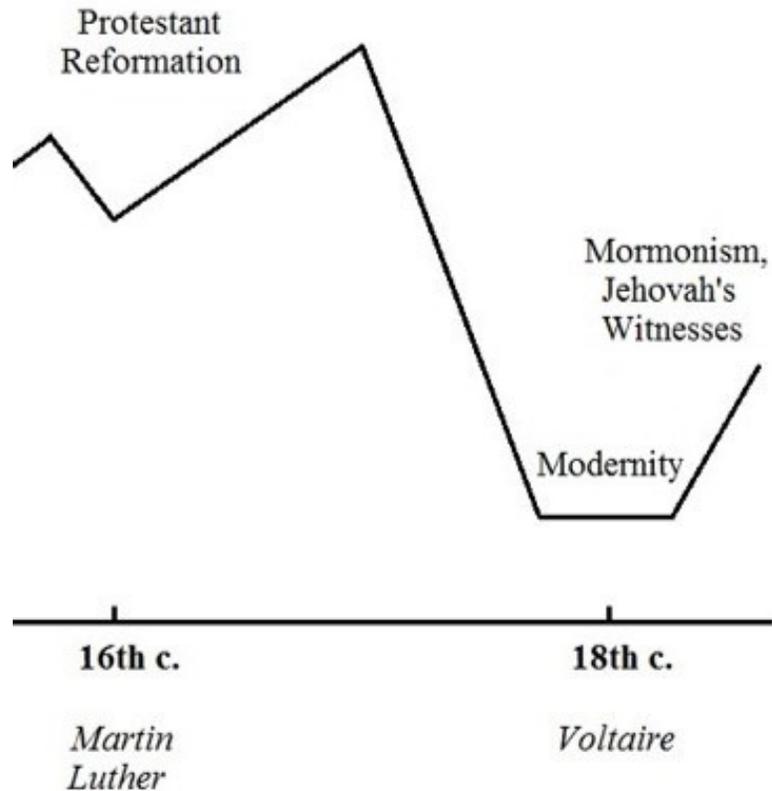
- Traditional religions, which were formed before the Enlightenment, have a limited number of ways to adjust to its ideology.
- Since their scriptural canons are fixed and cannot be altered to address new cultural developments, they can either accept or reject the social teachings of modernity.
- The first case produces what I call the renewal of religion; in the second case we witness its revival.

MODERN TIMES



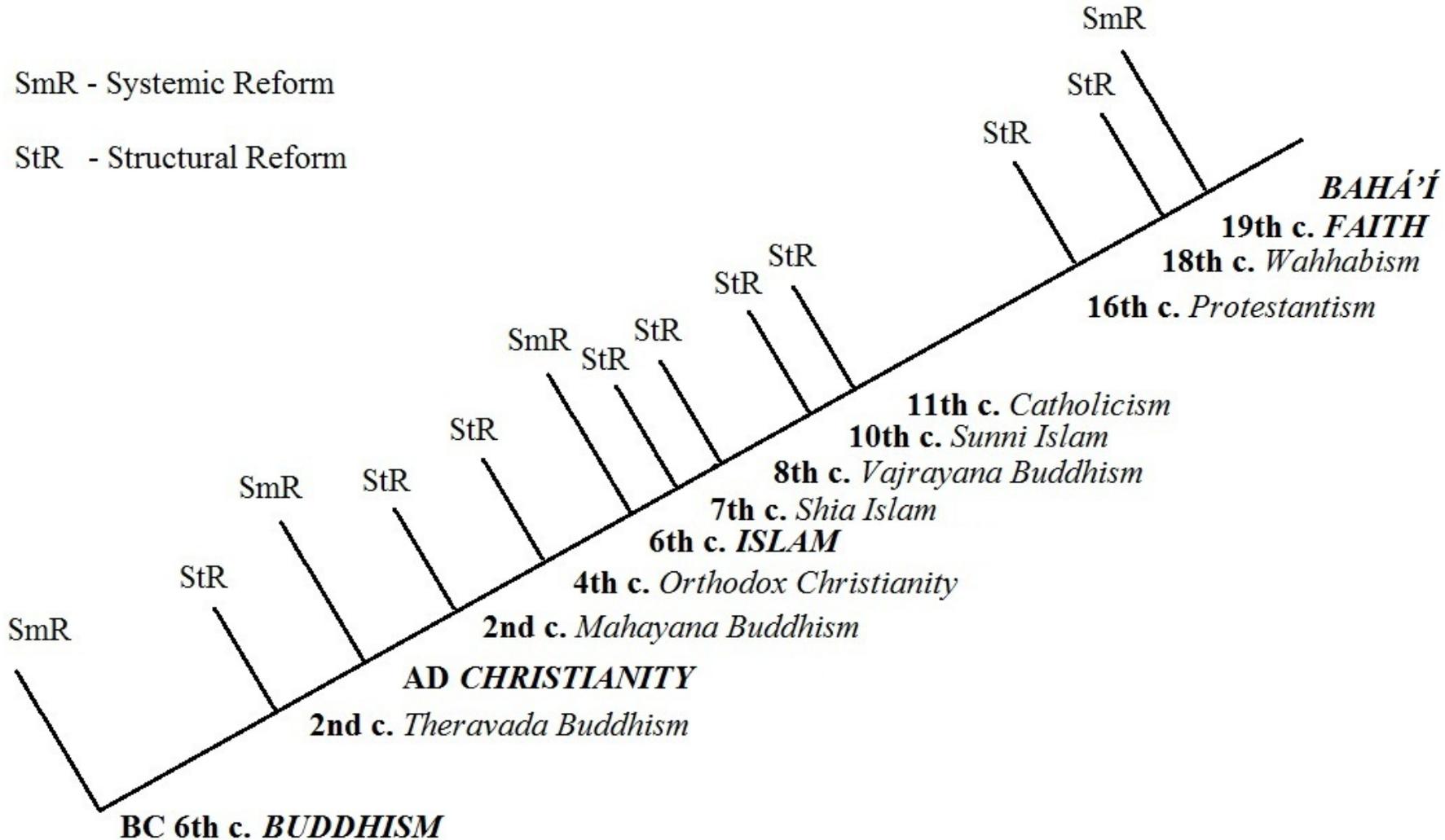
- Modern religions cannot afford such a reaction because their prophets had the opportunity to address modern issues and to produce a divine alternative to the secular worldview.
- Modern religious systems were established after the Enlightenment and they have the advantage of addressing modern political and social issues in their scriptural texts, thus erecting a new absolute foundation that supersedes modernity.

MODERN TIMES



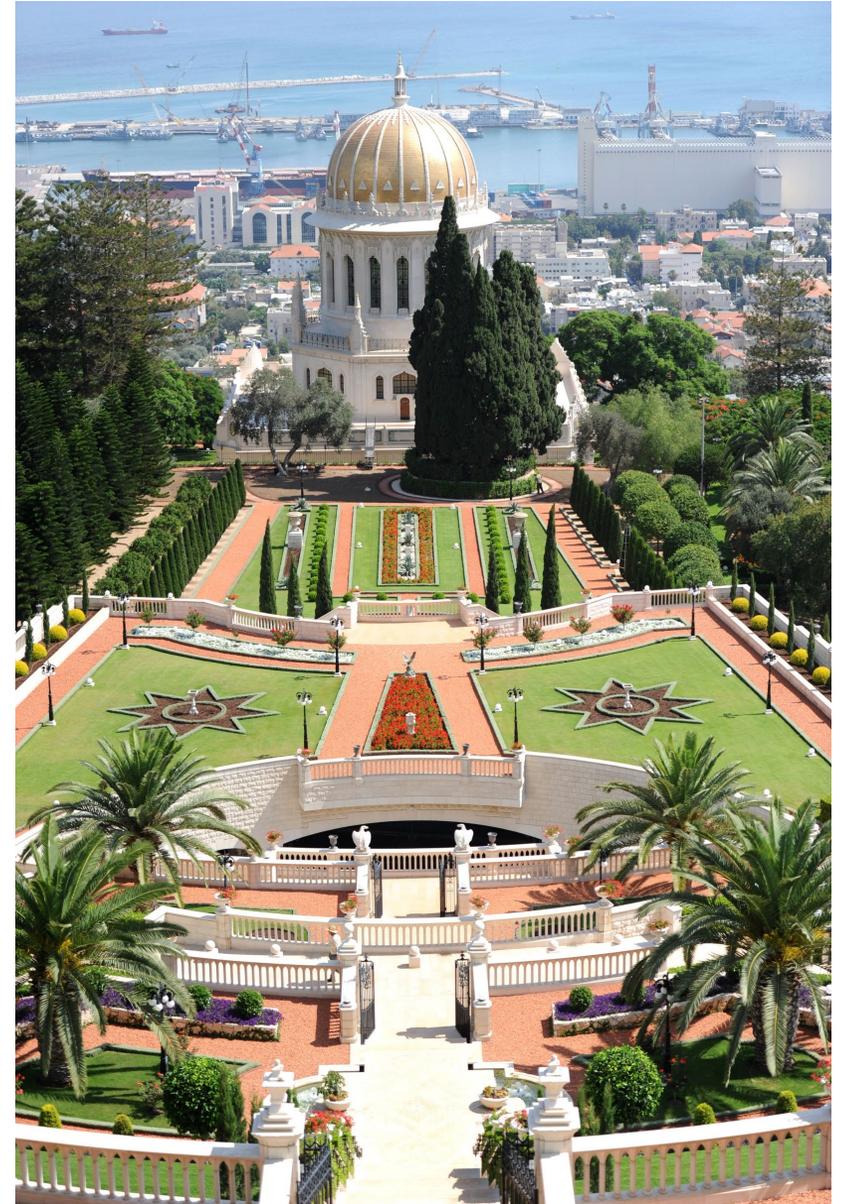
- Every religion has its own unique point of attraction, which functions as a spiritual magnet for believers.
- A modern religion won't be able to compete successfully unless it produces its own point of attraction that goes significantly beyond the claims of spiritual and moral reforms.
- The Bahá'í Faith is the only modern religion that provides an alternative social and political vision that goes significantly beyond modernity.

Comprehensive Table of Religious Cycles



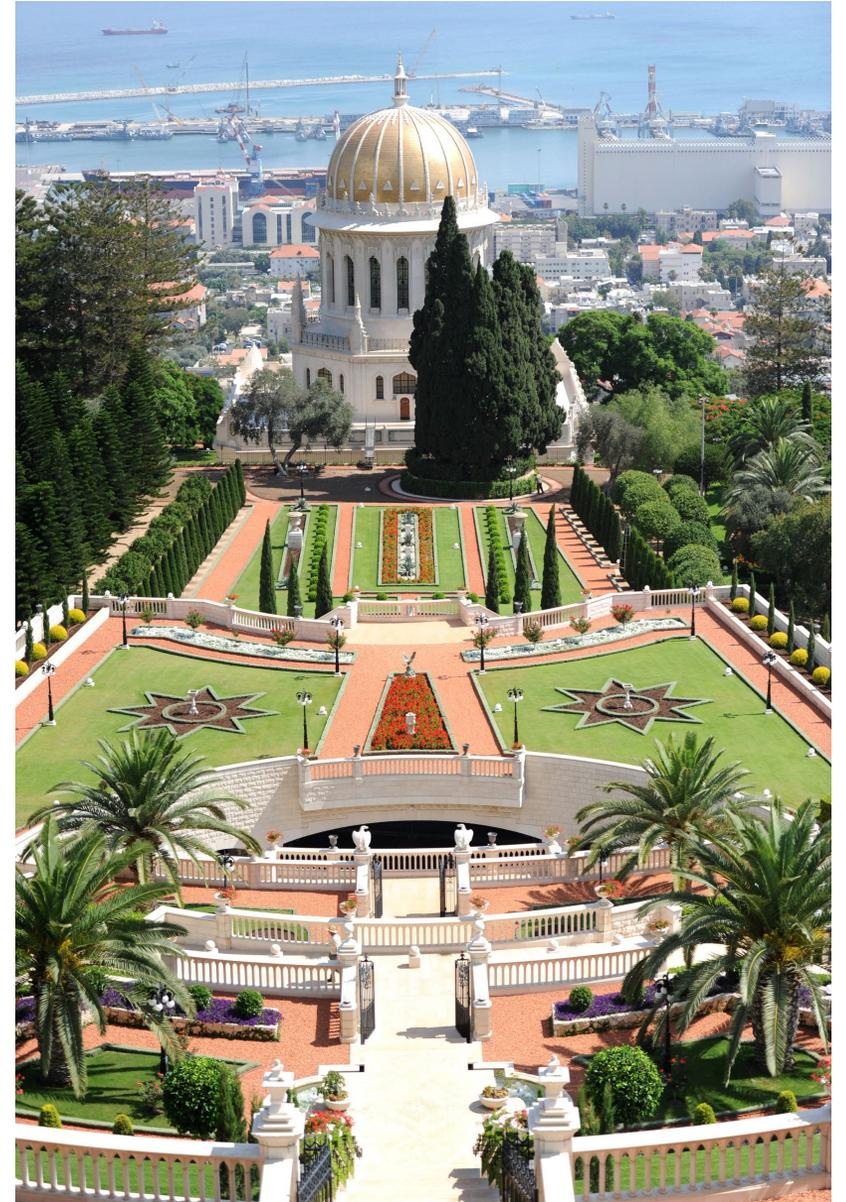
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS

- Culture (from the word “cult”) originates in religion and entails a set of beliefs that operate from within the individual. Civilization consists of rules that regulate the external behavior of individuals in society. Culture and civilization are interrelated, and the former can produce various forms of the latter.
- Modernity represents a specific type of civilization that developed from Christian cultural roots, while the Bahá'í Faith lays the foundation for its own distinct culture that may evolve into a variety of different civilizations in the future.



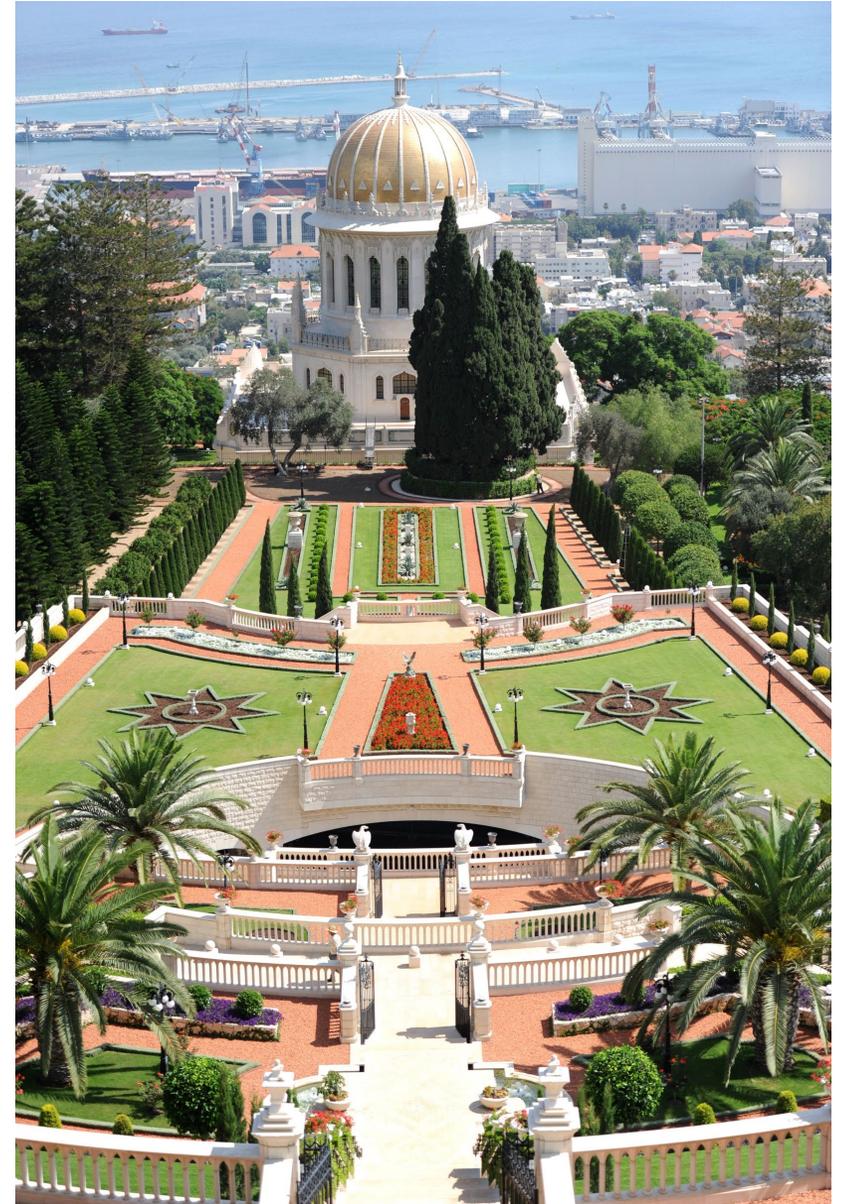
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS

- In many of His writings, Bahá'u'lláh not only addressed the issues of modernity, but also made them the turning point for His own religion.
- In *The Book of Certitude* (1860s) He discussed the modern crisis of religion in light of His reinterpretations of apocalyptic passages from the Bible and the Qur'ān.
- In a series of letters to the secular and religious leaders of the world Bahá'u'lláh advanced socio-political doctrines, which in many ways were in tune with the social program of modernity.



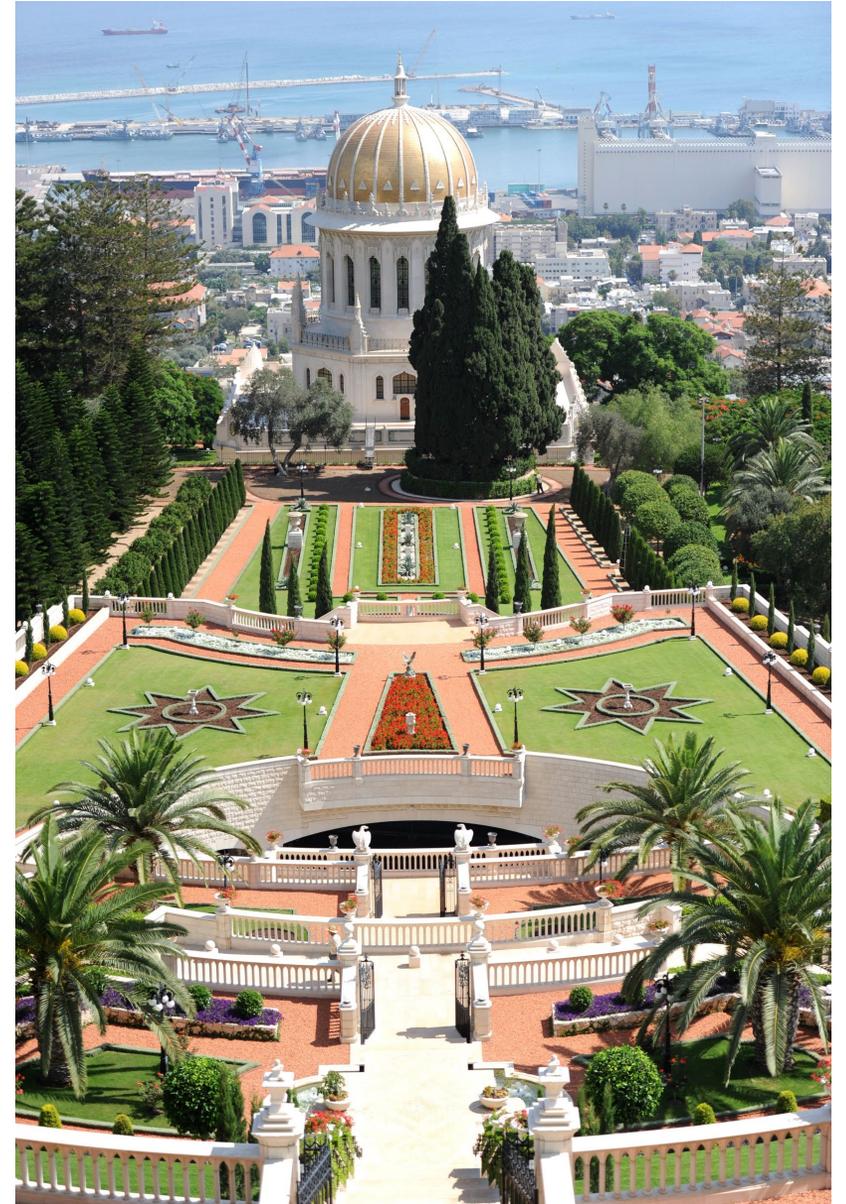
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS

- In the “Tablet of the World” Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed the Enlightenment principles of religious tolerance, freedom of expression and association, and equal human rights.
- Bahá’u’lláh wrote that the “unbelievers...have set their minds on four things: the shedding of blood...the burning of books...the shunning of the followers of other religions...the extermination of other communities and groups.”
- In the new revelation He pointed out, “these four barriers have been demolished [and] transmuted into spiritual attributes” (249–50).



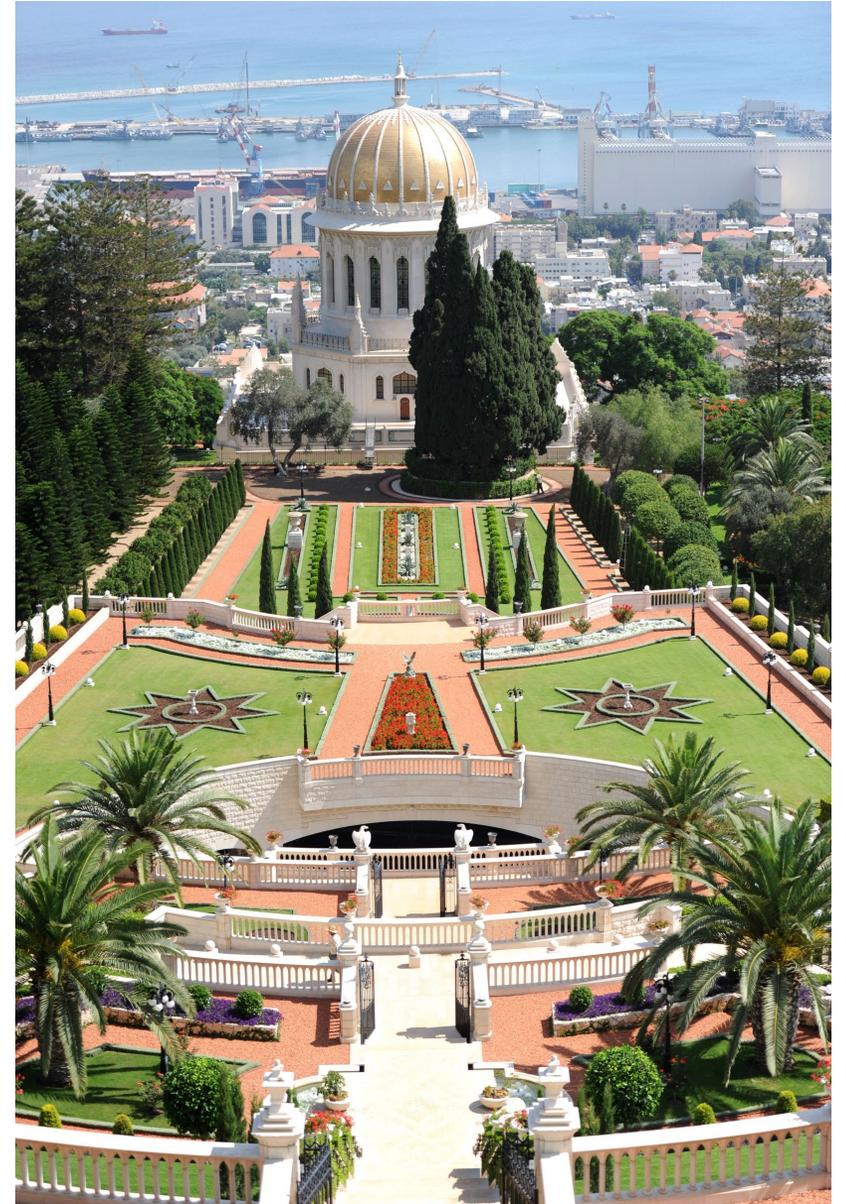
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS

- Bahá'u'lláh supported – and reinforced in His writings – the positive features, while questioning what He perceived as the downside of Enlightenment ideology.
- He encouraged scientific progress, but not when it leads to the invention of destructive weaponry and militaristic pursuits. He approved of the democratization of politics but fell short of sanctioning revolution and organized dissent.
- Bahá'u'lláh promoted inter-religious dialogue but predicted unforeseen calamities that may result from the secularization of life.



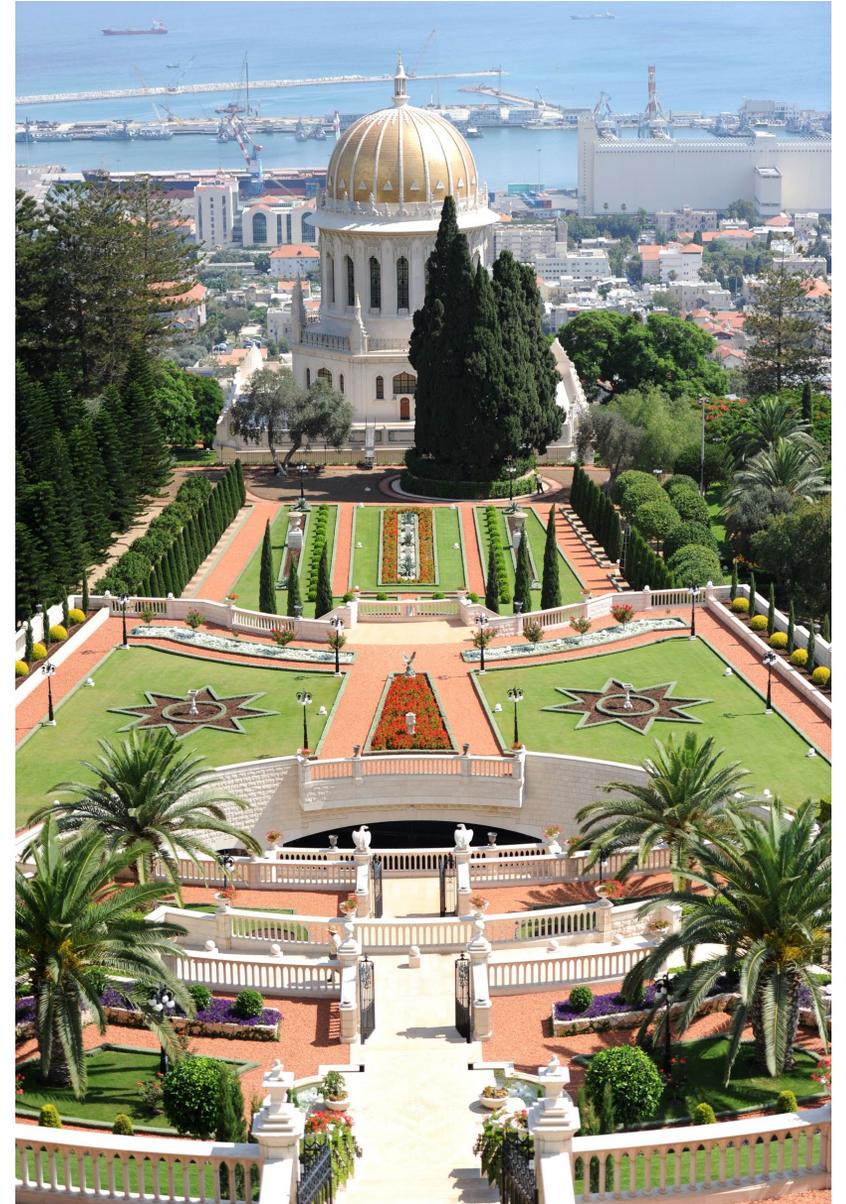
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í ORGANIZATION

- Every religion has three elements that constitute the power of its system – the interpretation of sacred texts, the administration of legal matters, and the observance of prescribed rituals.
- The Bahá'í Faith is the first sacred tradition, as far as I know, that introduced the modern principle of separation or distribution of powers into the domain of religious affairs.
- Bahá'í scriptures are the only sacred texts in the world thus far that explicitly speak of the separation of interpretation, administration, and worship.



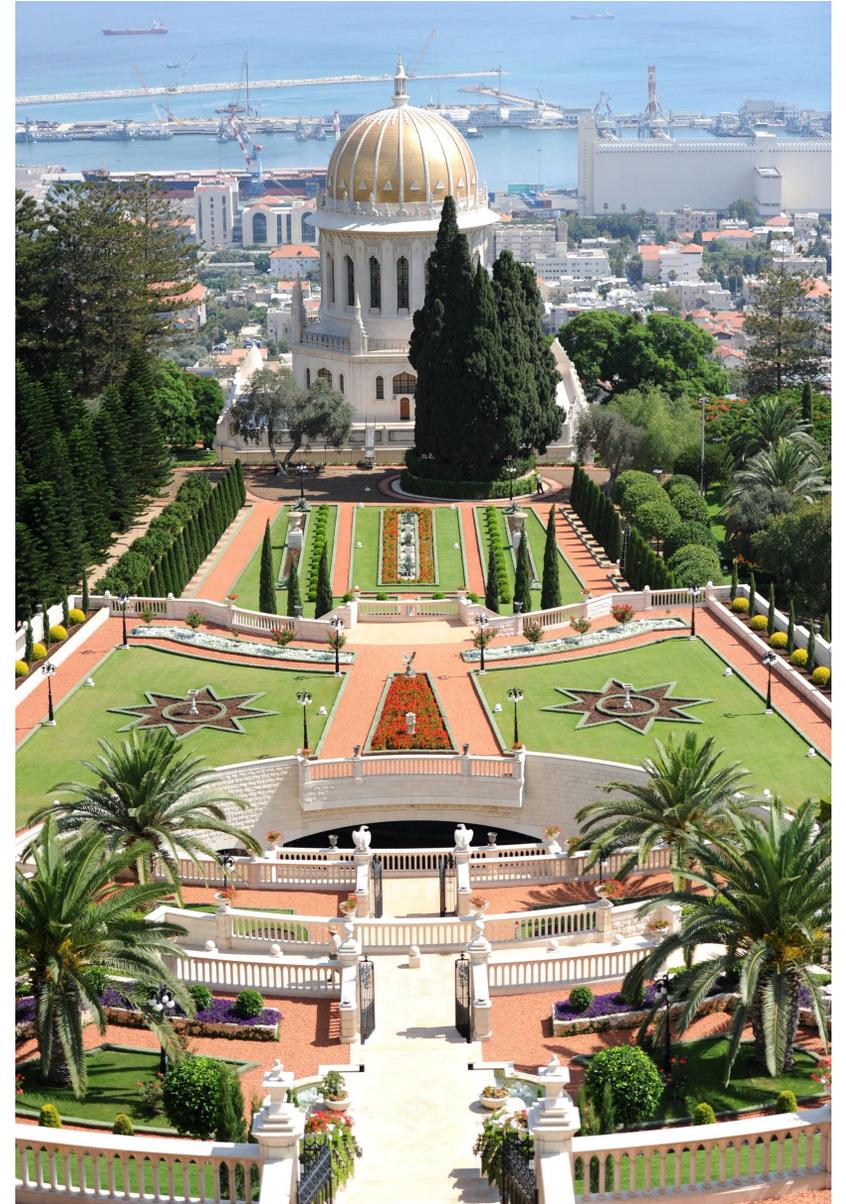
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í ORGANIZATION

- One of the major differences between Enlightenment ideology and the Bahá'í Administrative Order concerns the notion of infallibility.
- The Enlightenment worldview is based upon the belief in pure reason and the corresponding reliance on human rationality, which, is, by definition, subject to error.
- In contrast to the Enlightenment, the Bahá'í worldview is centered on the infallible truth of Divine revelation and so depends on the notion of infallibility.



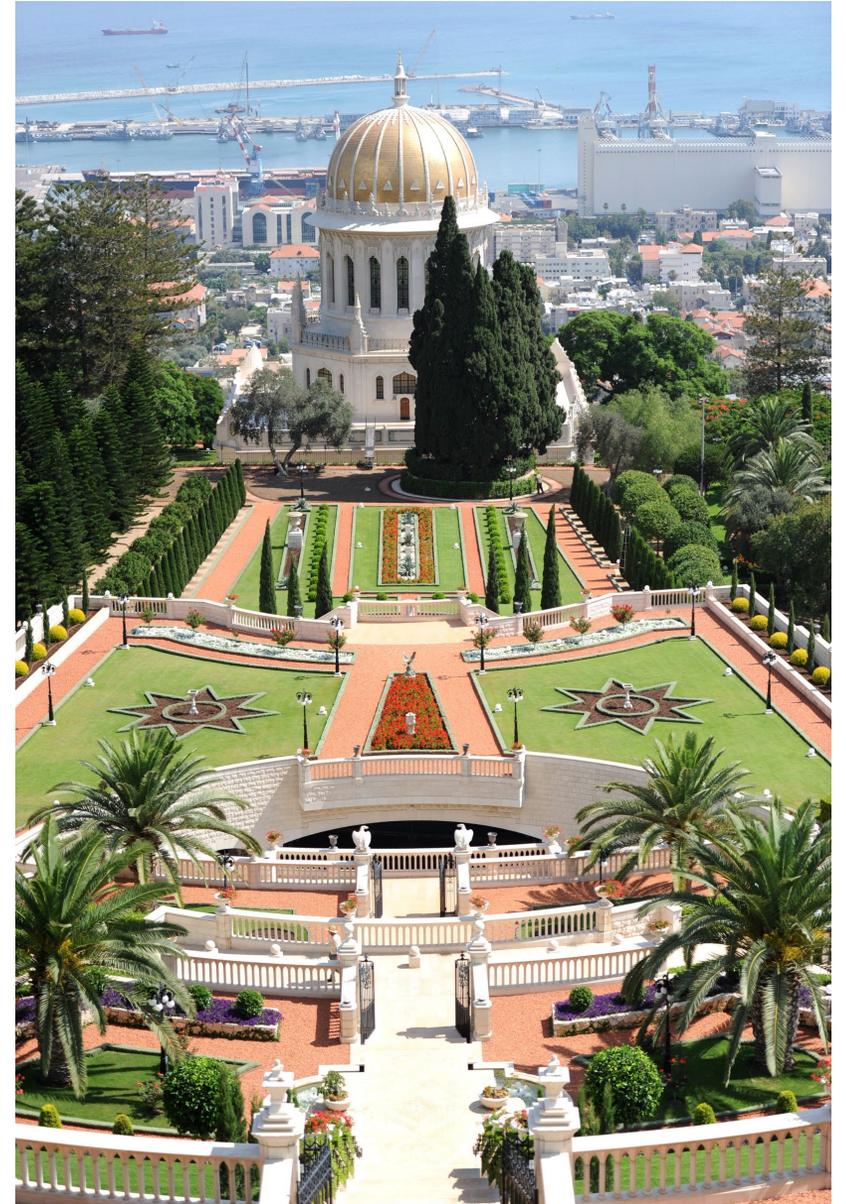
MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í ORGANIZATION

- Bahá'í teachings also diverge from modernity on the issue of organized dissent, which they prohibit in the structure and functioning of the Administrative Order.
- In traditional societies the prohibition of opposition was often a sign of tyrannical government. There are three main checks in the Bahá'í organizational system to prevent that from happening. The sanctity of elections, consultative procedures, and collective decision making by the spiritual assemblies are intended to guard the Bahá'í community from the misuse of authority.



MODERNITY VS BAHÁ'Í ORGANIZATION

- While Bahá'ís believe in the separation of religion and state, they also envision some form of cooperation between their faith and the government in the distant future.
- Being itself firmly separated from political affairs – Bahá'ís in the West are forbidden from getting involved in party politics – the Bahá'í teachings envisage the participation of the elected Houses of Justice in state governance. In my opinion, such involvement would be best served if accompanied by mutual checks and balances on the part of both religion and state.



REMARKS IN CONCLUSION

- The most important conclusion of my analysis of religious evolution consists in the assertion that we cannot fully understand the events of 20th-century history and, especially, the rise and fall of the Soviet empire, without recourse to Bahá'u'lláh and Bahá'í thought.
- Overall the Bahá'í Faith represents a religious tradition that is neither anti-modern nor simply modern or even postmodern, but instead truly post-modern in the sense that it regards the Enlightenment as a foothold for its own development that will eventually supersede it.



REMARKS IN CONCLUSION

- Although some of the features of the Bahá'í worldview may seem like a step backward from the project of the Enlightenment, a comprehensive comparison between the two demonstrates the progressive nature of the former over the latter.
- Bahá'í doctrines display spiritual depth, which is lacking in the Enlightenment ideology that relies purely on reason and external social reforms. As a result, Bahá'í teachings re-affirm most of the Enlightenment principles in a different religious setting thus making them more deeply rooted in the human psyche and consciousness.



REMARKS IN CONCLUSION

- Furthermore, Bahá'í teachings take into consideration the disproportionate development of various nations on the planet by modifying and adjusting some of the Enlightenment principles to better fit the whole of humanity.
- Such a position, with regard to modernity in general and the Enlightenment in particular, gives the Bahá'í Faith a unique attraction and an advantage over both the older and the more recent religious movements – an advantage that, if properly understood and appreciated, would reveal its high long-term potential.



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