

Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm

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Publisher: Zero Palm Press, Prague, 1995, 177 pages

Reviewer: Christopher Buck

Paradigm analysis is an integrative approach to the study of religions as systems.¹ It has heuristic value (explanatory power) in disclosing the concatenating or interconnected “logics” of belief (i.e., faith, doctrine, ethos) and praxis (i.e., ritual, piety, and ethics). Precisely because it takes this approach, Udo Schaefer’s *Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm* is an important contribution to Bahá’í studies. In focusing on Dr. Schaefer’s paradigm analysis of the Bahá’í Faith, this review will complement an earlier review that recently appeared in *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*.²

Two independent essays make up this slender, but rich, volume. The first essay, “Time of the End or a New Era?” (15-49) addresses various types of “apocalyptic” social anxieties, in which the planet is seen as engulfed in crisis, tottering on the verge of extinction. Beyond its paralysing effects, the significance of this pandemic dread (what one might regard as a “no future syndrome”) is that it constitutes “a crisis of Western thought” (24). The cynicism of imminent catastrophe, seen as an irreversible prospect of world-historical proportions, is held in equipoise by the countervailing optimism of the so-called “New Age” movement, which may be analysed as a collective set of responses to modernity and postmodernity. Thus, Schaefer brings together the prophets of doom and gloom with the utopian wish-images of various New Age movements.

Schaefer is rather nonspecific in speaking of these movements. They are described under the rubrics of “Western esotericism, Eastern mysticism, and modern psychotherapy” as well as “astrology, hypnosis, Zen-Buddhism, reincarnation therapy, magic and occult practices, native American mythology and shamanism” (36). The reader is simply provided with footnote references to monographs, in German, on these topics. While not anchored in hard data, Schaefer’s generalisations will probably withstand those exceptions that “prove the rule,” so to speak—namely, that New Age movements represent a virtual “escape from a purely secular image of the world” (37).

The author’s analysis of the development of Western thought is instructive, providing the necessary context within which the New Age movements can be seen. According to Schaefer, the current “global crisis” is a consequence of a

1 A paradigm is a “pattern” or model of explanation.

2 Loni Bramson-Lerche, Review of Udo Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm*, in *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 7.1 (1995): 91-93. Schaefer’s book is of particular interest to the present writer, who has made independent use of the concept of “paradigm” in a forthcoming book: *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in the Bahá’í Faith and “Persian” Christianity* (Albany: State University of New York Press).

process of secularisation that began in the Enlightenment, which resulted in a “Copernican transformation” of Western thought in 17th-century Europe (26). A mechanistic world view remained “the dominant paradigm” in the natural sciences well into the 20th-century. In a word, what most characterised the Enlightenment was “the belief in the rational transparency of the world” resulting in its “demystification” (27). A totalising faith in reason and progress functioned as “a new, secular form of religiosity” in which “ideology and utopian ideals” have disenchanting traditional religious truth-claims based on notions of “revelation” (30) or disclosures of metaphysical reality through the agency of God-inspired prophets. Faith in enlightened reason has altogether eroded any sense of social “orientation” (31, citing Michel Foucault) and has brought about “the exhaustion of utopian energies” (31, citing Jurgen Habermas). Thus, Western society has “entirely banished the metaphysical” (33) and is now paying the price for it. The utter relativisation of values has accommodated pluralism, but in such a way as to deprive traditional morality of its normative, shaping force in society.

Against this backdrop, Schaefer categorically states: “The New Age paradigm is founded on a holistic view of the world. Man is seen in a pantheistic, monistic way as part of the Divine” (37). It is as if the New Age movement has answered the secularisation of society with a kind of divinisation of the human. In this essentially anthropocentric world view, the configuration of the Divine is ultimately solipsistic. The consequence of such “subjectivisation of truth” is that social standards are no longer viable or possible. Indeed, while Schaefer asserts that the stability of society is bound up with “a generally accepted value system,” he is quick to point out that universal standards of morals and human values are largely lacking in modern and postmodern society. In this spiritual vacuum, New Age movements fail to provide any consensus on whatever direction society ought to take. New Age spirituality is so polymoral that it is functionally amoral.

In the final pages of this essay, Schaefer introduces the Bahá’í Faith as offering a “new paradigm” (42) anchored in revelation, in which the will of God for the world today is apprehended and affirmed by faith, and a universal value system is offered. In contrast to “the old ecclesiastical paradigm” of Christian salvation, “the new paradigm depicts a divine economy of salvation” (46), according to Schaefer. The nature of this “economy” is paradigmatically different from traditional Christianity.

The nature of this new paradigm is developed in the second essay, “On the Diversity and Unity of Religions” (51-150). This essay begins with a “Prefatory Note on the Concept of Paradigm,” in which the author assimilates Thomas Kuhn’s definition of “paradigm” as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by a member [*sic*; read “the members”] of a given community” (Kuhn, *apud* Schaefer, 55; cf. 26, n. 41). Schaefer then speaks of the “unity paradigm” central to Bahá’í belief and praxis. The rest of the essay

unpacks this core concept.

On the basis of Bahá'í texts, the author ventures to say that religious ideologies and practices are constellated around their respective core concerns. These function as organising principles, to which all other ideas and actions are subordinated. Thus, Christianity may broadly be characterised as the “religion of love,” Judaism as “religion of justice,” Islam as the “religion of absolute submission,” Buddhism as the “religion of detachment” and Zoroastrianism as the “religion of purity.” The Bahá'í Faith is roundly described as the “religion of unity” (56). Then, at some length, Schaefer expatiates on the Bahá'í notion of “Progressive Revelation” and highlights its universalising and integrative features, in which all past historic religions are seen as epochal incursions of the divine, prophetic “voice” in human history.

Certain resonances with Bahá'í universalism are noted, such as the pronouncements of Vatican II (86) and the theology of Hans Küng (90-91) as well as other advocates of interfaith dialogue, notably Willard G. Oxtoby (see esp. 97), John Hick, and others. The contributions of scholars in the academic study of religion are also acknowledged (94-106). Although respectful and admiring of the contributions of scholarship, Schaefer underscores the epistemological limits of disciplined empirical inquiry, in which judgements on the nature of truth are necessarily bracketed. While the study of religion can and does promote “respect and understanding” among religions and better prepares them for dialogue (103) and for common cause, scholarship is not privy to the noetic sphere of the numinous (99), nor can it “deliver incontrovertible proof of the unity of religions” (104). In a word: “Academics are not in a position to fathom the plans and intentions of God” (106).

The concluding part of the book begins at section IX, “The New Paradigm: Progressive Revelation” (106-150). Interestingly, Schaefer speaks of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of religion. The former is “constant,” while the latter is “variable” (138). That is to say, the heart of religion—in its “vertical” relationship to the Holy—is essentially mystical and unchanging, while the “horizontal” dimension is socially referenced and thus in a state of flux, conditioned by historical exigencies. The Bahá'í Faith is referenced to modernity. It represents a veritable “paradigm-shift” in religious history, in which all religions are viewed federally as integral to history. The Bahá'í Faith thus offers a unique, teleological theory of civilization that “makes sense” of history by defining the past in terms of the present. There is a certain acquisitive nature to revelation in that it is a “progressive” unfoldment of spiritual verities in direct proportion to humanity's capacity for cognisance of spiritual reality.

Does Schaefer's paradigm analysis succeed? In the second essay, tensions between Bahá'í universalism (egalitarian teachings) and particularism (specific truth-claims) are not acknowledged and thus remain unresolved. More significantly, the nature of the paradigm-shift from Islam to the Bahá'í Faith is

not explored in either of the two essays. To do so would require a clear definition of “Islamicity.” While fundamental and pervasive, the ideal of “submission” or surrender of self-will to the will of God may be too facile or truncated to be a fair characterisation of the Islamic paradigm. However, Schaefer does attempt to articulate systematically the Bahá’í paradigm by means of thirteen short discourses on the Bahá’í doctrine of Progressive Revelation (118-150). A systematic theology of the Bahá’í Faith remains to be written.

Schaefer’s style is vigorous, and, at times, rushed. *Beyond the Clash of Religions* offers a rich admixture of Bahá’í teachings—in their “pure” (i.e., scriptural) form—and Schaefer’s own penetrating analyses of postmodern predicaments. But the latter sometimes verges on judgmentalism, as in the pejorative classification of “modern psychotherapy” as part of the New Age “scene” (37). Readers with a knowledge of Buddhism will perhaps challenge the way in which Schaefer presses Buddhist teachings into a Bahá’í mould. Such uncritical harmonising might raise suspicions about doctrinal imperialism. Moreover, in so doing, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s canon of believer-intelligibility is ignored, to the detriment of true dialogue. But these kinds of problems typically plague any theology of pluralism. Notwithstanding, Schaefer is certainly one of the most “engaged” writers in the contemporary Bahá’í world. He commands respect, even when he invites objection. Schaefer is a mine of information and a quarry of insights. He makes judicious use of etymologies.

Editorially, the book suffers from a number of misspellings and faulty transliteration. For instance, the second paragraph of the Preface begins: “The fist [*sic*, for “first”] essay...”. The opening quote of the second essay is identified as “Maleachi” (*sic*; read “Malachi”), and so forth. As to transliteration, the reader with a background in Bahá’í source languages will react to “maḏháhib” [*sic*, p. 78, n. 133; read “madháhib”], and “Ittaḥád” [*sic*, p. 132, n. 447; read “ittiḥád”], as well as a number of missing macrons. Positively, the use of macrons (flat accents) instead of acute accents is welcome, as it disencumbers the book from one of the idiosyncrasies of Bahá’í publishing.

Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm contributes to an emergent, extracanonical Bahá’í ethos. It is an intellectually respectable articulation of a distinctively Bahá’í world view. This book is recommended as an introduction to the Bahá’í religion for educated or intellectually-inclined audiences. More significantly, Udo Schaefer has effectively adapted Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm” and “paradigm-shift” from the history of science to the history of religion. There is every probability that Udo Schaefer’s approach will gain wide currency throughout the Bahá’í world.