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An Investigation of the Compatibility of Baha'i Views with Religious Diversity

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Abstract

The Baha'i faith is a relatively new religion that has quickly gained popularity over the past century. Its main theological concepts include progressive revelation and religious unity, and perhaps its most important goal is unity among all humans, which takes the form of a single religion and eventually leads to a single peaceful society. Such a destination would first require interreligious dialogue and the acceptance of truth in many world religions at present, according to Baha'i teachings. Ideas of religious diversity have already spread among some Theocentric theologians, which leads us to question if such views are compatible with Baha'i doctrine on religious unity. This study investigates how the Baha'i faith promotes concepts of religious diversity in order to achieve its eventual goal of religious and societal unity, and whether Baha'i teachings are truly compatible with pluralism.

The conclusions of this study reveal that while Baha'is promote the concept of religious diversity today, their eventual goal is not compatible with pluralism. Because pluralism implies the existence of multiple religions that share truth, its outcome is different from a single, worldwide religion. Theocentric ideas encourage diversity, but do not specify a formal outcome, which means that interreligious dialogue and acceptance of truth in many faiths could lead to pluralism or unity. Therefore, Theocentric theology does not necessarily disagree with Baha'i goals or the concept of pluralism due to a lack of specificity.

This study is significant as our societies become more globalized, such that the coexistence of religions is becoming more critical. The Baha'i faith's strong focus on religious unity sets it apart from religions that are traditionally exclusive. An analysis on such a religion that emphasizes

interreligious dialogue and encourages cultural fusion is therefore essential for our understanding of interactions between religions in a multicultural society.

Keywords

Religious diversity, pluralism, Baha'i, comparative religion, religious unity

Introduction

The Baha'i faith is much more generalized in its theology than most other religions. The faith is based on the teachings of the Bab and Baha'u'llah, who began prophesizing from prison in 1852, writing mostly in the form of tablets as letters[1]. The ensuing formal religious movement broke away from Shi'ite Islam, although there are many references to Christianity in its teachings[2].

While other major religions are incredibly detailed in their teachings, both in the ethics of how to live one's life and in teachings about the divine and the world, Baha'i theology is broader, more thematic, and leaves more up to individuals to fill in the gaps. This is evident when simply looking at published material on Baha'i teachings. For comparison, the Catholic Church has published an official Catechism covering concisely all of the major teachings of the faith, and its

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[1] Christopher Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 2, 137-141.

[2] Francis Beckwith, *Baha'i: A Christian Response* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 5.

second edition spans 825 pages and over 250,000 words[3]. The Baha'i faith does not have a catechism or similar document, but a direct comparison might be drawn from their current online compendium of teachings which is comprised of under 10,000 words across 13 sections, much of which quotes Scriptures in addition to explanations[4] (the Vatican also has the same Catechism online as a similar reference, making the two comparable). This stark difference is an example that shows just how much Baha'i teachings intentionally lack detail in comparison to other faiths.

As a newer religion, the Baha'i faith has the benefit of looking at history and learning from mistakes. Christianity went through many iterations of details with many changes over time, especially through the ages of councils. It is because of small changes in details, like the Filioque or transubstantiation in Catholicism, that the Christian Church has had many internal arguments, even leading to major schisms. A focus on details is also a primary factor in why strife continues to be present between different traditions of Christianity and between different world religions. Such problems could be mitigated if fine doctrinal details are omitted and only main themes are promoted. It is quite possible that one contributing factor for the more generalized approach to the Baha'i faith may be a strategic methodology to limit division. In fact, one of the main teachings of the faith is that division goes against God, while unity agrees with God's will[5].

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[3] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Edition (New York City, New York: Doubleday, 1995).

[4] David Langness, *The Main Baha'i Teachings*, 2024 <bahaiteachings.org/bahai-faith> Accessed 15/04/2024.

[5] Peter Simple and John Kolstoe, *Baha'i Teachings: Light for All Regions* (Fairbanks, Alaska: John Kolstoe, 2016), 13.

Perhaps the most central teaching of the Baha'i faith is that all religions are correct so long as they worship God[6]. If one is to proclaim that all religions, despite being incredibly different in even the most important details, are all correct, then one must ignore the details completely to have any chance of making a convincing argument. Therefore, Baha'i theology is broad and generalized because it must be. The more detail that is given, the easier it becomes to find contradictions between religions to disprove teachings, making it harder to be credible. By remaining thematic in both tone and content, the Baha'i faith is able to make claims of unity with far fewer vulnerabilities.

It is because of this approach that we have a need to more deeply analyze the Baha'i faith through the lens of religious diversity. On the surface, it would appear that Baha'is might promote religious diversity in its purest form, and that the faith is completely compatible with general views on pluralism. However, doctrine on progressive revelation might complicate this relationship, so a formal analysis is both helpful and necessary. This article provides an introduction to relevant Baha'i views, an overview of Theocentricism and academic work on religious diversity, and a direct comparison to determine compatibility between the two. The goal is to understand the compatibility of Baha'i views with the concept of religious diversity, as this will have implications on religious diversity in a globalized society.

Such a comparative analysis is important for studies in compatibility of world religions with religious diversity. As societies become more globalized and cultures mix, coexistence of religions that normally differ is a critical topic of discussion in academia and within organized religion. Studies have begun to scratch the surface of such analysis for major world religions, but

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[6] Simple and Kolstoe, *Baha'i Teachings*, 13.

although the Baha'i faith has fewer adherents, it is of great importance because it is the most well-known and globalized religion that specifically focuses on religious diversity or unity as a theological foundation, setting it apart from major world religions that are traditionally exclusive. If a religiously diverse society is either desired or destined, it becomes imperative to analyze it through the lens of a religion that, at least on the surface, seems to champion the idea.

Baha'i Theology

The main themes of the Baha'i faith are as follows. 1) All people are equal. 2) People must treat all others with respect and love without judgement and should always help others when needed. 3) There is truth in all religions when they do not encourage division, and the purpose of religion (and humanity in general) is the worship of God, the Creator. 4) The end goal for humanity is a single worldwide civilization with one religion, a universal language, and peace. 5) Science and religion must complement each other[7]. These are five of the most important themes taught by the Bab and Baha'u'llah, the central figures in the faith who are said to have been divinely inspired. It is impossible to include all major and minor teachings of the Baha'i faith in a short article, so only relevant teachings will be discussed.

Singular Society

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[7] Kenneth E. Bowers, *God Speaks Again: An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing, 2004), 169-174 and Simple and Kolstoe, *Baha'i Teachings*, 13-15

The endgame for humanity – a singular worldwide society – is a theological, predictive concept in the Baha'i faith that includes a much greater amount of detail than most other theological concepts in the faith, which are generally broader and thematic. The description of the society in which humans should strive to reach, as intended by God, has social, economic, political, spiritual, lingual, and educational components. Such a society is intended to represent a peaceful, loving society that is happier, healthier, and more in tune with God than the societies of the present and past[8].

In order to achieve a singular, positive society, Baha'is believe that everyone in the world should receive a quality education[9], as well as a universal language. Communication is one of the most essential components of a functional community, so if all people are to come into communion with each other, they must have a single language through which to communicate. Baha'u'llah believed that having a universal language for communication between nations would considerably reduce war and would also be one of the most important contributors to the unification of the East and West, which at the time were incredibly estranged[10]. Since the East and West are still very culturally different today, bridging the gap between them through education and communication may be the biggest and most important challenge to worldwide unity.

One important factor contributing to division in humanity is nationality and patriotism. Pride in one's own country and the need to compete with other countries for a better livelihood can lead to prejudice and war. The proposed Baha'i method of solution to this barrier is a single

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[8] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 215.

[9] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 176-177 and Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 166.

[10] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 179-180 and Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 180-182.

worldwide government as a part of the singular society endgame. This idea was originally

discussed by Baha'u'llah, but was later expanded greatly by Shoghi Effendi, who is perhaps the

most prominent non-prophetic author in the faith. According to Effendi, such a government would

look nothing like any government in history because it would "blend and harmonize", which is

something that has never been accomplished before[11]. Such a government would encourage unity

among all people, provide welfare to address economic strife, and according to the Baha'i, would

bring humanity into a "Golden Age" with a single religion[12].

A unified government and society is not only important because it encourages world peace,

but also because humans, by nature, are social animals and require social interaction. The practice

of religion is also a social activity, so from the Baha'i perspective, having a single society would

also promote religious unity. Because of this, Baha'i views on society and religion must go hand-

in-hand.

One Religion

While individual religions are capable of bringing such a society to a group of people, worldwide

religions are not presently unified, making permanent peace between them impossible. Even under

a unified society with universal language, education, government, and economics, religious

differences between people could create division. Religious differences not only jeopardize peace,

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[11] Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Baha'u'llah* (New Delhi, India: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1938), 152.

[12] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 225.

they also risk breaking from truth about God, and the Baha'i solution to this problem is the "Principle of Oneness"[13]. This principle includes both the oneness of God and the oneness of religion, implying that the same God is present in all religions. If this is true, then there is no reason why religions cannot become one, worshiping the same God in unity.

Baha'is justify the efficacy of a singular religion by making two main claims. First, all world religions worship the same God, and prophets within religions are simply different messengers of that single God. Because Jews, Muslims, and Christians all worship the same Abrahamic God of the Torah/Old Testament, it can be said that they worship the same God in different ways. Baha'is also connect Brahman – the creator of the universe in Hindu theology – to this single Abrahamic Creator. In fact, Brahman from Hinduism, Tao from Daoism, the concept of Nirvana in Buddhism, and Yahweh/God/Allah from Abrahamic religions are all "human attempts to encompass what cannot be encompassed [God]"[14].

Second, all world religions teach the same main themes about humanity and how each individual should treat others. According to Baha'i theology, today's major world religions promote equality among all people and demand that their adherents help others in need while showing love and respect to everyone. Such love and selfless tendency are "born of the Holy Spirit", implying divine involvement[15]. In this way, the Holy Spirit – a source of divine influence – is found in all religions from the Baha'i perspective. Jesus preached two commandments: love

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[13] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 157.

[14] Momen and Momen, *Understanding*, 2-3.

[15] Bowers, *God Speaks Again*, 158.

God and love other people (Matthew 22:37-9). Muhammad instructed Islam to love God alone and to "do good" to all people, including strangers (Qur'an 3:36). Hindu Scriptures are the source of the idiom "do onto others what you would have them do unto you" (Mahabharata 5:1517). Accordingly, all religions contain some instructions toward selflessness.

The beliefs on the unity of religion are based in the *Book of Certitude*, one of the main Scriptures in Baha'i doctrine. The concept of a single, universal Creator is expressed succinctly in the *Book of Certitude* within paragraph 104:

> "To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress…He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness."

Baha'is place a strong focus on the idea that God is of a completely different nature than His creation and is therefore omniscient and beyond the comprehension of humans: "No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures"[16]. It is in this way that Baha'i theology distinguishes God as a monotheistic entity while simultaneously distancing Him from what Baha'is refer to as prophets. By specifically stating that nothing can bind God to humanity, Baha'is can

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[16] Baha'u'llah, *The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing, 2003), 104.

effectively discard the divine components of Jesus in Christianity, Krishna (among other gods under Brahman) in Hinduism, etc., and cast them as divinely inspired prophets.

While this would clearly be disagreeable to those religions, from the Baha'i perspective, it conveniently removes barriers to unification. For example, perhaps the main point of contention between Christianity and other religions is Christ's divinity. Without a divine component, Christians may not focus as much on Christ's uniqueness, making them more open to other religions, and Islam and the Baha'i faith already credit him as a prophet. If Hinduism did not call the many deities below Brahman "gods", and instead accepted them as prophets, other religions might be less inclined to dismiss Hinduism as polytheistic. By shifting all divinity to the Creator and leaving none for any other being, it would become much easier to reconcile religions with each other. In this way, Baha'is view world religions to be compatible, even if the religions themselves do not hold the same opinion.

Prophets and Progressive Revelation

Much of the second half of the *Book of Certitude* describes how all world religions worship the same, single God. "All the Prophets of God, His well-favored, His Holy, and chosen Messengers, are, without exception, the bearers of His names, and the embodiments of His attributes"[17]. This means that, as stated only a few paragraphs earlier in this text, God is incomprehensible, but human prophets throughout history are a physical, imperfect representation of some of the attributes of God. These prophets, or messengers, include the central figures to world religions: Moses from

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[17] Baha'u'llah, *The Book of Certitude*, 110.

Judaism, Jesus from Christianity, Muhammad from Islam, the Buddha from Buddhism, and many other major and minor prophets from major world religions. These "chosen Ones of God are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God…mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God"[18].

There are a few important points to pull from these Baha'i Scriptures. First, even though these Messengers are essentially reduced in valor from their portrayals in their original religions (e.g. Jesus no longer being considered divine), they are still highly respected as unique, holy individuals who are somehow greater than the average person. Baha'i theology is not simply pulling information from theologians throughout history to support its ideas; instead, it is claiming religions themselves are important and have power and credibility because their central figures were extraordinary, and Baha'i theology takes its revelation from those extraordinary people. Second, these messengers are "embodiments" of God's attributes. Not only are the messengers extraordinary, but they have also been uniquely blessed with divinely inspired characteristics. Third, the Scriptures repeat the idea that God has multiple names. This is a metaphorical way for Baha'i theology to explain how all religions can worship the same God in different ways. Hinduism may call the Creator "Brahman" and have completely different views of Him than Jews, who call Him "Yahweh", but this does not mean that the two religions worship two different creators. Rather, both worship the same God, but they call Him different names and "see" different components of Him in different ways. The differences in views of God originate with the differences in God's messengers, which may be intentional.

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[18] Baha'u'llah, *The Book of Certitude*, 151.

In fact, if such differences are intentional, and therefore religions are different on purpose, then each world religion may be revealing something uniquely important about God. It is for this reason that Baha'is must look at all religions as both true and relevant in order to gain a more complete understanding of God. For Baha'is, this understanding is a progressive revelation which becomes more and more complete over time. The term "progressive revelation" is important because it does not imply that each religion is dedicated to a particular facet of God, but instead explains how revelation has continuously built up over time to become clearer and more perfect. Earlier religions had prophets that taught in the context of limited knowledge and understanding, in specific cultures, and under specific circumstances. As human understanding of both the world and of God progresses over time, new prophets elaborate and modify the teachings of previous prophets based on humanity's capacity for theological information at their given times in history. In this way, world religion is a living, growing, and constantly maturing idea, and prophets from different religions are simply teaching it at its different life stages[19].

Because the messengers of different religions are divinely inspired embodiments of characteristics of God and are selected by God to reveal Him to the world in certain ways, one can only conclude that these messengers are the best pathways toward knowledge of God. According to Baha'i teachings, the central figures of world religions, as messengers of God, "act as intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual world" and "manifest in themselves perfectly the attributes of God, such as knowledge, love, justice and patience"[20]. Even though the messengers are not divine, they are considered to be infallible by Baha'u'llah and the Baha'i faith.

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[19] Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 135-137.

[20] Momen and Momen, *Understanding*, 3.

"God is the One infallible Authority, and the Prophets are infallible because their Message is the Message of God given to the world through them". However, this message is only infallible at the time it is given. When a new prophet in a new religion delivers a modified version of a previous message, the new message succeeds the older one in all ways that they disagree[21]. Anything from older prophets that is not directly contradicted by newer prophets is still considered to be canonical and true, but anything added or changed by a newer prophet takes precedence.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from analysis on progressive revelation. 1) Since newer prophets "trump" older prophets when they disagree, Baha'u'llah becomes the highest prophet by default, and all his teachings are "final". This also means that because Baha'u'llah promotes the idea of progressive revelation and that all religions are true, Baha'is submit to the idea of religious unity. 2) Since all major figures in world religions are infallible prophets that reveal God's truth to the world, the teachings of all world religions that do not disagree with Baha'u'llah are credible, and the culmination of them across all religions can provide the framework for a single, unified world religion. While these claims can be considered self-fulfilling, they can create a framework that cleans up any discrepancies between religions such that the concept of religious unity can follow a logical path from the Baha'i perspective.

Interactions with Other Religions

In order to reach a society of unity, Baha'i teachings instruct adherents to approach all others, regardless of religion, with love, tolerance, and hospitality, and interact with them joyfully. In this

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[21] Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 138-139.

initial step, evangelization is not the goal and should not be attempted. The purpose is instead to show others the caring and loving nature of people of the Baha'i faith. In fact, contention with others and prejudice is outright forbidden for Baha'is in general[22]. Baha'is recommend this same practice to all religions, creating interactions that are full of love and charity and devoid of conflict. It is only possible to create unity if conflict and negativity are avoided.

Additionally, Baha'is recommend to all other religious people that they learn about and participate in the traditions of other religions. Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, recommends that Christians and Jews visit Muslim Mosques, and vice versa, in a respectful manner with an open mind. Similarly, the hosting religion should treat visitors with respect and hospitality to encourage a positive relationship[23]. By putting prejudice aside, people of different religions can join together to celebrate the things that their faiths have in common – selflessness and caring for others, and thankfulness for creation. The purpose of these activities is to develop a friendship based on common beliefs that can aid in the defeat of prejudice, as such toxicity interrupts peace and prevents any chance of eventual religious or social unity.

Theocentric Methods

While the ideas of religious unity and religious diversity are not formally indoctrinated in major world religions, they have been discussed academically among theologians, and a prime example of this can be found in Theocentricism. Theocentricism is very new in comparison to other

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[22] Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 133-134.

[23] Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 134.

theological methods, only first being discussed in Christianity after Vatican II, specifically in

Nostra Aetate which first opened the possibility of salvation in non-Christian religions from the

Christian perspective[24]. Following this landmark document, early Theocentric theologians began

to both criticize and build on Vatican II's ideas in the 1960s and 1970s, including John Hick in his

1970 book *Philosophy of Religion* (and other publications thereafter) and Raimon Panikkar, who

wrote about connections between Hinduism and Christianity in his 1964 book *The Unknown Christ*

of Hinduism (later formally republished in 1981) and proceeded to build upon an interreligious

theology in subsequent publications. Since then, many theologians have taken Theocentric ideas

in different directions.

The basis of Theocentric theology is the worship of a single God, the Creator, also referred

to as the monotheistic God, the personal God, the cosmic Being, the Other, or the Real[25].

According to theologians who hold Theocentric views, all world religions worship the same God

in some way, and any discrepancies in the details are primarily due to cultural, historical, and

psychological influences[26]. By this logic, the basis of all religion is the same, so even though many

of the details may differ, adherents of different religions should be able to find common ground

and agree on the most important points[27]. Religions are therefore relative to each other in themes,

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[24] Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 1-4.

[25] John Hick, *The Philosophy of Religion*, 4th edn (London, England: Pearson, 1990), 210-230 and
Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 115.

[26] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London, England: MacMillan Publishers, 1973),
131-139 and *God Has Many Names* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1980),
5-6.

[27] John Hick, "On Grading Religions", *Religious Studies* 17.4 (1981), 451-467.

while being relative to their cultures in details[28]. It is easy to see how such a theology would be more compatible with religious diversity than any present-day Christian tradition. The core intention of Theocentricism is to show how all world religions have the same goals and the same main content.

One of the most prominent Theocentric theologians is Paul Knitter. His ideas are focused on reconciling the Christian Church toward a more Theocentric viewpoint. According to Knitter, there are four models to approach religion with respect to what he calls a "Theology of Religions", only one of which truly embodies Theocentricism as a realistic outcome for humanity. In this model, which he calls the Acceptance Model, many world religions are true in their own ways, and in order to avoid disagreements, they should accept those differences instead of attempting to reconcile their likenesses[29]. For this model, adherents of individual religions would need to admit that while truth exists within them, they also contain ideas that are either incorrect or ill-interpreted. Developed from a postmodernist point of view, the Acceptance model first emphasizes that every fact, data, or idea originates in a human culture and is therefore influenced by that culture, leading to bias[30]. In other words, according to Knitter, "all human knowledge is filtered, and the filters are incredibly diverse"[31]. Knitter's Theocentric model theorizes how many religions can be revelatory

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[28] Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London, England: SCM Press Ltd., 1985, 148.

[29] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 173.

[30] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984, 33-34.

[31] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies*, 175.

through the same, single Creator. This is the first step for religious coexistence in a multicultural society, as fruitful interactions between religions would be impossible if each had no path for truth in the others.

Henning Wrogemann outlines four approaches to such a society in his book *A Theology of Interreligious Relations* (2019), the third volume of a multivolume series on intercultural theology. As Theocentricism spawned from Christian theologians, these four approaches are focused on how Christianity can change in order to better accommodate a multicultural and religiously diverse society, but the concepts can more generally be applied to all world religions. The four approaches are Revisionist, Interpretive, Selective, and Interactionist.[32]

The Revisionist approach is championed by Knitter and Hick. One of the central claims that Hick's theology attempts to defeat is the justification behind Christian exclusivism. Instead, from Hick's perspective, God reveals His salvation plan outside of Christ it is because Christian theologians come from a biased Christian background that they see Christ's role as unique, but a non-Christian perspective reveals that salvation can manifest in other equally important ways in other religions. The concept that God loves humanity unconditionally is not unique to Christianity, and while Christians understand this idea through Christ, Hick claims that all other major religions – even those that are non-theistic – also understand the same concept of God's love by other means. He also states that a human being does not have to believe that Jesus is divine in order to follow

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[32] Henning Wrogemann, *A Theology of Interreligious Relations* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

his teachings, and that many non-Christians around the world are able to understand God's love without accepting Jesus as a sole Savior[33].

The Interpretive approach is championed by Michael von Bruck and Stephen Mark Heim. Theologians who are proponents of this approach wish to reinterpret Christianity through the lens of other religions in order to connect them. Contrary to Revisionists, the Interpretive approach attempts to keep the core tenets of Christianity intact but interpret them in ways that relate adherents of different religions together. Both von Bruck and Heim aim to keep the Trinitarian concept at the forefront of Christianity, but with a reinterpretation of its meaning in the context of other religions[34]. Therefore, the most important part of any approach to religious diversity is interreligious dialogue. If approaching dialogue with humility, respect, solidarity, and love, members of two different religions can thrive together, working side-by-side to address common goals such as attention to the poor and the conquering of evil. This promotes respect and understanding, which socially opens each individual to receive help and guidance from the other in the path toward God[35].

The Selective approach is championed primarily by Francis Clooney, who attempts to compare religions not from a high-level, critical point of view, but instead from a loving perspective with the skills needed to fully understand Scriptures as they were originally written.

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[33] John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 101-108.

[34] S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 123-124.

[35] Michael von Bruck, *The Unity of Reality* (Munich, Germany: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 364.

Such an approach allows one to immerse themselves in another religion and culture from a less biased standpoint by attempting to study it from the perspective of its adherents, leaders, and original Scripture authors (and their contexts). It is through such study that a comparison across religions can be made, and this allows individuals to experience the spiritual power of two religions, which from Clooney's point of view, is essential for any analysis on religious diversity[36]. Like the other models, Clooney believes that in order for the Selective approach to work, interreligious dialogue is essential for comparative theology[37].

The Interactionist approach is primarily championed by Amos Yong. For Yong, the Holy Spirit acts in a variety of ways, and this diversity of gifts from the Spirit is distributed through the diversity of world religions. Therefore, the goal is not to determine how salvation occurs in other religions or what may or may not be true in other religions, but instead to practice praxis through being a loving, hospitable neighbor from a "pluralistic position"[38]. Yong discusses the variety of gifts of the Holy Spirit analogously to the Spirit being a variety of spirits across religions, all grounded within rationality. In other words, people of different religions encounter the gifts of the Holy Spirit through rationalism within their own faiths, making the Spirit a public character who

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[36] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2010, 62-67.

[37] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 48-49.

[38] Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008, 99-100.

inspires different communities in different ways[39]. In order for such an interaction to occur, Yong promotes continuous, hospitable relationships that lead to friendly interreligious dialogue[40].

Across the four Theocentric approaches, Theocentricism's main ideas come into focus, with two major common themes: 1) they work toward a theology of religious diversity, and 2) they recommend interreligious dialogue as a primary path to achieving such a theology. This makes Theocentricism the central promotor of religious diversity, with views similar to those of the Baha'i, who also promote religious diversity in today's world and encourage dialogue to achieve it. All of the above models and approaches agree on these two major points. Details on methodology vary greatly across different theologians and their models and approaches, making it difficult to comment more specifically on Theocentricism as a whole, but for a comparison between Baha'i views and the concept of religious diversity, a thematic representation of Theocentricism is sufficient. With this background, we can begin an analysis on the compatibility of Baha'i theology with ideas of religious diversity.

Compatibility of Baha'i Beliefs with Religious Diversity and Theocentric Ideas

On the surface, one might conclude that Baha'i views are completely compatible with the concept of religious diversity. Such a conclusion would be based on key similarities between the two. Both promote truth in all religions, where Baha'is claim truth across all major religious figures which

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[39] Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003, 129-131.

[40] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 150-160.

form a line of prophets fulfilling progressive revelation, while religious diversity simply implies that all religions are true today using various justifications, depending on which approach or model is being used. Also, both state that one religion is not necessarily "greater" than all others, although Baha'is would point to their own faith as the most correct because it is the only one to make such a claim of religious equality. Additionally, the two agree that a primary way to achieve acceptance of truth between religions is through respectful interreligious dialogue. With such parallels, the two philosophies may seem to be congruent on the surface.

However, when looking at the final desired or predicted outcomes, discrepancies can be observed. Baha'i teachings specifically state that the final world outcome must be a single unified religion. This implies two things: 1) there is no longer more than one religion, so either all but one religion has dissolved or combined, or all religions have disappeared in favor of a single, new religion; and 2) due to there being a single religion in a single society, there is no longer a diversity of religious opinions in the world, but instead a single mindset with a single set of doctrine.

This outcome is, by definition, in direct conflict with the strict concept of religious diversity. Such a term implies that multiple religions coexist in harmony, admitting that there is truth and value in all other religions and proclaiming that one religion isn't necessarily better than another. Importantly, for Theocentricists and advocates of religious diversity, this remains true while maintaining a formal separation of traditions, such that multiple religions exist independent of each other. Thus, the fulfillment of religious diversity requires a multitude of religious systems to remain in place. There can be nothing diverse about a reality with a single religion and single belief system like the Baha'i strive to enact as they predict an eventual single society with a single religion.

Therefore, the long-term goal of the Baha'i faith is not compatible with the concept of religious diversity because it necessitates singularity. The pathway toward such a society may be matched with religious diversity because it requires all religions – each still being intact – to participate in dialogue and come to theological agreements. Similarly, the present version of Baha'i theology, which exists in a world with multiple major religions, could be considered religiously diverse because it promotes universal revelation and claims that all religions worship the same God with the same themes in a *diverse* set of ways. However, regardless of the intended methodology or pathway, the end goal of unity is not compatible with diversity, so diversity simply becomes a necessary precursor.

The end goal truly matters in this analysis because it indicates the purpose of a given faith. For traditional Christians, the end goal is salvation for all people by spreading Christianity to every person in the world. This is clearly not in line with the concept of religious diversity, and similarly, the Baha'i goal of unity (which could be paralleled with the Christian unity that would result in converting every human) is also not of the same intent. While diversity is certainly desired early in the Baha'i plan for world religion as a method for finding agreements, promoting peace, and preparing humanity for a unified society, pure diversity does not exist in the final plan.

Interestingly, Baha'i teachings do not directly conflict with Theocentric views. Nothing about the Baha'i prediction of a single society with a single religion violates Theocentric theology. This is because Theocentricists primarily discuss theology and provide insights for how to begin the journey toward that theology, but do not formally specify an outcome. Theocentric theologians would all agree that we should shift toward a theology of religions in some way, but none would make a firm statement on how the eventual outcome would appear many years after such a theology comes to fruition.

This is, at least in part, because Theocentricists are necessarily more open to a wide range of outcomes. Interreligious dialogue cannot be fruitful if there is a predetermined outcome for it, so if a society is to eventually turn toward one of religious diversity, it must simply allow the process to be organic and mostly unguided. This necessary flexibility allows Theocentricists to be open to many different positive outcomes but limits their abilities to predict the future. Therefore, while Theocentricists do not generally state that a single unified religion is in humanity's future, or even that it is the best possible outcome, they also do not reject such an outcome as a possibility. It is important to note that just because one viewpoint is detailed in predictions while the other is not, the two are not necessarily irreconcilable. Theocentric-inspired religious diversity, if it gains traction worldwide, could very well turn into something similar to the predictions of the Baha'i faith.

Theocentricists, in their openness, seem to tread a fine line between the Baha'i faith and the strict concept of religious diversity. Religious diversity, by itself, is a state of world religion and culture, and therefore serves as a perceived endpoint as long as it is present in the world. The Baha'i faith also proclaims an endpoint, in this case of religious unity, culminating presumably into a single religion that looks like the Baha'i faith itself. Theocentric views do not specify an endpoint, but instead promote a model of theology that serves as a methodology for understanding God and pushes religious society in a different direction. By not having a formal endpoint, Theocentric theology is not in conflict with either the concept of religious diversity or the Baha'i faith, even if those two do not completely agree themselves.

It can be noted that other major Baha'i teachings are compatible with Theocentric views and the concept of religious diversity in general. Equality of all people is a central theme in Baha'i ethics, and this theme rests well with Theocentric ideas which promote interreligious dialogue on

equal and respectful grounds. It becomes difficult to partake in meaningful dialogue if one person is considered to be superior to another. Also, the Baha'i concept of a singular society (regardless of the number of religions within it) does not necessarily conflict with Theocentricism and religious diversity. Many countries today, especially in the developed world, are home to people of multiple faiths living under the same government, which indicates that multiple religions are capable of existing in a single society. In fact, if multiple religions do exist in the future world, interreligious dialogue and a sentiment of equality among religions might be crucial for a single society to be successful. So, it's not as if Baha'i teachings are completely against diverse views, and it seems that only the Baha'i endpoint for humanity is the source of confliction.

In conclusion, the Baha'i faith could be considered as an effective facilitator of religious diversity in the world relative to its current state. It provides a new theological approach to religions through progressive revelation, redefines the goals of salvation to fit more broadly across religions, and provides a methodology for achieving agreement between religions through dialogue. However, because the ultimate goal of the Baha'i faith specifically unity, the faith itself in a vacuum is not compatible with religious diversity because its goals do not match a religiously diverse outcome. Interestingly, Baha'i views are actually compatible with diversity-oriented Theocentric views which promote religious diversity but do not specify a firmly defined outcome, which means that Theocentricists neither confirm nor reject the final Baha'i outcome but firmly accept its short-term goals. This might imply the potential for Baha'is and Theocentricists to collaborate in the future for achieving a more religiously diverse society. As Theocentricism originally stemmed from Christian theologians, boundaries between major world religions, the Baha'i faith, and religious diversity may be blurrier than originally thought.