

REPORT OF THE SECOND CAMBRIDGE BAHÁ'Í STUDIES SEMINAR ON METHODOLOGYAND ETHICS

St. John's College
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Following what was thought by most of those who participated to be the fruitful discussions of last year's seminar, it was felt that a further week-end of this type would be desirable. After last year's seminar, a most interesting and valuable was received consisting of a letter from the Universal House of Justice, forwarding the comments of their Research Department on the report of last year's seminar. Substantially the same document has now been printed in Bahá'í News (June 1979) and therefore there is no need to reproduce it here. This document was frequently referred to during the course of the discussions of the week-end and several questions arising therefrom are to be referred to the Universal House of Justice.

The programme of the week-end suffered several set-backs in that two of those who were to initiate the discussions of a session were unable to attend. Denis MacEoin who was to have shared in the initiation of the Sunday morning discussion was unable to return in time from Edinburgh where he was defending his Ph. D. thesis. Robert Parry, who was to have presented a paper on Phenomenology and Methodological Agnosticism on Saturday afternoon was unfortunately ill. The latter has however forwarded a brief synopsis of the paper which he would have presented and this may be found in an appendix to this report.

In the following report, the talks presented at the beginning of each session will be summarised first. Since in the ensuing discussions some points, such as the relationship of the relationship of Bahá'í scholars to the Bahá'í community, came up at various times during the week-end, the discussions will be reported as a whole seperately.

Stephen Lambden's paper: An Hermeneutic Odyssey...

The seminar's programme was started on Saturday morning with the first part of an interesting and well-researched paper delivered by Stephen Lambden. The second part of this paper was delivered on Saturday afternoon. The following is a brief resume of the main points of the paper which has been prepared by its author:

In his essay(paper), An Hermeneutic Odyssey: Preface to the working out of a Methodological Paradigm/ stance relevant to bahá'í studies with particular reference to the hermeneutic theories of modern Biblical scholars and theologians, Mr. Stephen Lambden (Newcastle upon Tyne) presented a wide variety of thoughts and raised a number of issues for consideration. His essay, parts of which he read and explained in more detail, consisted in an elaboration of the substance of a shorter paper, Hermeneutics, the question of presuppositions and related matters of methodological import in the writings of Biblical scholars and theologians. In portions of the essay presented, aspects of the hermeneutic theories of biblical scholars and theologians(particularly of modern Protestant existentialist extraction) were detailed in illustration of contemporary methodological problems especially as related to the question of 'objectivity', and 'subjectivity', 'presuppositions' and 'pre-understanding' (Verständnis). His essay was also intended to be a direct and indirect critique of the concept of 'methodological agnosticism'(c.f. Report of the 1978 Cambridge Seminar on Bahá'í Ethics and Methodology). In Mr. Lambden's view 'methodological agnosticism(if taken to imply that absolute scholarly 'neutrality', 'objectivity'. or 'presuppositionlessness' is possible, necessary or desirable) is both an inadequate and misleading term: especially if regarded as a methodological stance relevant to Bahá'í scholarship or seen to be a viable methodological orientation outside the considered application of it to a clearly worked out methodological paradigm(now in existence). Any claim to 'objectivity' it was argued, must take account of the question of 'subjectivity' and 'presuppositions': they cannot simply be

ignored

One cannot simply claim to be 'value-judgement' free, 'neutral' or 'objective' without showing how those inescapable presuppositions are to be controlled, utilized or 'annihilated' (hypothetically). What ~~is~~ in fact ^{is} meant by 'objectivity' and what by 'subjectivity' was also a question raised. It was noted that certain modern hermeneutic theorists have regarded 'objectivity' (as making an 'object' by 'distancing' ^{the 'object' of enquiry} ~~it~~ from its 'subject' = 'objectifying') as a neo-Cartesian type presupposition in itself, that some among such hermeneutic theorists have seen 'objectivity' as more appropriately the 'meeting' or 'immersion' of the 'subject' in the 'object' of his enquiry. This raises the question of ~~what form of 'objectivity' is most appropriate and whether 'methodological agnosticism' (as a stance hypothetically implying detached 'objectivity') is really possible or desirable for Bahá'í scholars.~~ Presuppositional analysis was regarded by Mr. Lambden as of great importance. Presuppositions that belie an absolute 'objectivity' must be realized and considered. In this connection he drew attention to the following passage from Stephen Neill's The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1961 (Oxford University Press 1966), p. 331,:

"...the personal equation can never be completely eliminated...when we approach the field of religion...no man can possibly be neutral, and, however great the care the scholar may take to allow for his own convictions, prejudices and predilections, he remains himself—he cannot jump out of his own skin. Every writer who handles matters of this kind is something of an apologist; the more convinced he is of his own neutrality, the less likely it is that he will be genuinely neutral..."

A fanatic desire for 'objectivity' can so 'distance' the scholar from the 'object' of his enquiry that distortion results as it does from a naïve desire to encompass the 'object' of enquiry such that 'subjectivity' is allowed free and uncontrolled reign. What should be sought for ~~is~~ a balance between these two extremes, i.e. some kind of (to use Ninian Smart's terminology) "neutral subjectivity" or "empathetic objectivity". Mr. Lambden felt that whether faith was seen to be an undesirable presupposition depends on how 'faith' is conceived and how (among other questions) it relates to the 'object' of faith and the 'object' of enquiry in terms of a methodological paradigm or set of methodological guidelines. If 'faith' is to be seen as a limitation in scholarly research (it need not be) or impediment preventing scholarly 'objectivity' we must determine how we understand and have 'faith'; how we understand the 'religion' we have 'faith' in (or do not have faith in) and how that religion invites or defines faith.

Aspects of this question of 'faith' and 'objectivity' etc were investigated in terms of a brief analysis of the positions of Maurice Wiles (Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford) and the phenomenologist of religion Ninian Smart. Mr. Lambden pointed out that Wiles (a theologian) advocates "Faith" + "capacity for critical detachment" while Smart (in terms of certain stages of the phenomenological study of religion) reckons that "empathy" + "bracketing" (of truth or "expressive" positions) is desirable. This raises the question as to where "faith" begins and "empathy" ends or what the difference between "bracketing" and "capacity for critical detachment" really is. A similar note on the notion of Bernard Lonergan's critique of 'The principle of the Empty Head' (i.e. that scholarly neutrality that attempts to be presuppositionless) was mentioned, (though time did not permit a full reading of this part of the essay).

To attempt to set down further aspects of Mr. Lambden's essay it might be helpful to note that he was able to detail some of his thoughts and proposals on three interconnected themes: a) general methodological suggestions and questions for consideration in working out a set of methodological guidelines for Bahá'í studies, b) Hermeneutics and ~~the~~ presuppositions and pre-understanding (Vorverständnis), etc., c) The question of 'methodological agnosticism' and 'faith' as methodological stances (cf. above). Having set down some of the issues raised under 'c' and, since Mr. Lambden did not have time to present details of his essay covered under 'b', I shall list some of the points he made and questions he raised under 'a', i.e. general methodological suggestions, questions and issues, etc.

- 1). It is not always the case that methodological problems can be settled in concrete ways. i.e. Concrete methodological problems often raise or are raised by non-concrete philosophic, hermenetic, ^{or} epistemologic issues that are not normally the direct concern of the 'specialist' researcher'. Not all methodological problems can be resolved without striking a balance between 'general' methodological presuppositions that are deemed acceptable and 'concrete' methodological 'problems' and aims, etc. The need in this light to clarify discussion by realizing that concrete methodological problems may be different for different areas of scholarly Baha'i research but that some general methodological presuppositions of a non-concrete nature may be fruitfully discussed by all in such a way that confusion does not result.
- 2). The need for a greater methodological awareness that will promote methodological integrity among Bahá'í scholars along with a realization that the methodological flux in present-day scholarly disciplines should make us think carefully about arbitrarily utilizing non-Bahá'í methodological stances as being in whole or ⁱⁿ part relevant to Bahá'í studies.
- 3). That a method is not a fixed and unchanging model or paradigm that can automatically bequeath methodological integrity to Bahá'í scholars or set down all relevant methodological guidelines. A method is necessary but not a fixed or straight path to true scholarship in that one cannot fully crystallize out of methodological debate all factors that make for scholarly integrity or yield meaningful 'scientific' results. Mr. Lambden stated that he was in essential agreement with Bernard Lonergan (b. 1904) the Catholic philosopher (among others) who regards methodological 'rules' as "but a framework of collaborative creativity" which should not be "meticulously followed by a dolt" (cf Method in Theology (1972), p. xi, 14 fn.
- 4). A method must not circumscribe relevant questions we ask of the 'object' of our enquiry. A method can give methodological guidance but it cannot enable us to understand.
- 4) It is not enough to analyze why Bahá'í scholarship might be said to be in its infancy but to decide and act upon what needs to be done and to raise methodological questions and issues ~~which~~ ^{which} that have either not been raised ^{seem to have been} or settled too prematurely.
- 5) The need to ask more deeply what Bahá'í scholarship is for, unless we know what it is and what it aims to achieve, we can hardly discuss ^{its} method(s). (Mr. Lambden suggested that a working definition of what Baha'i studies is might be: Bahá'í studies = The study of the Baha'í Faith as a religious

phenomenon as it has expressed and realized itself in history and society).

- 6). The need to ask what constitutes the 'field' of Bahá'í scholarship and whether it incorporates one or many disciplines with possibly different methodological needs. Is there one Bahá'í methodology or many Bahá'í methodologies suitable to the investigation of different objects of enquiry in the field of Bahá'í studies? Is indeed there a specifically Bahá'í (text based) methodology?
- 7). That it might be legitimately asked whether there is a Bahá'í philosophy theology, psychology, epistemology, etc, and in this respect the need to under-take a survey of disciplines specifically mentioned in Bahá'í texts and disciplines spoken about in general in Bahá'í texts.
- 8). The need for methodological debate to go hand in hand with the clarification of the fundamentals of Bahá'í doctrine, etc. That we hardly yet have an adequate notion of what is meant by such possibly methodologically relevant questions as those associated with an understanding of 'revelation', 'the Manifestation of God', 'infallibility', 'faith', 'knowledge', 'inspiration', etc. The need in clarifying such fundamentals to produce (as much as the need for spirituality might be legitimately stressed) lexica, concordances, maps, chronologies, bibliographies, handbooks, all manner of philological aids and to achieve greater proficiency in the languages of the Bahá'í revelation.
- 9). The need for clarity in debate to be gained by the differentiation (if warranted) between methodological pronouncements made on the basis of Baha'i criteria, those made on the basis of non-Bahá'í criteria and those which might be a conflation of the two.
- 10). That at this stage of methodological debate we can hardly hope to frame a methodological paradigm; that a methodological 'unity in diversity' is more desirable than a 'methodological imperialism'.
- 11). That discussion of methodological issues would have important apologetic/apological ramifications as realized by Biblical scholars and theologians; i.e. that the proper starting point for apologetic/apology can be seen as an honest methodology that states plainly its necessary presuppositions. To give 'faith' a compelling expression in the world today we need methodological clarity and integrity.
- 12). That there is a need to study Bahá'í matters more 'comprehensively' and to avoid that distortion that results from selectivity, unwarranted 'superimposition' of Bahá'í categories onto other religious traditions, and to take proper account of the Sitz im Leben ('Life setting') of Bahá'í works.

13. The need to discuss and decide-if we wish to work out a specifically Bahá'í methodological paradigm (assuming there is one-or several)- what Bahá'í texts are methodologically relevant or meaningful and to analyze, systematize and study them in detail. That until this is done it is hardly possible to speak of a or the Bahá'í methodology.

On Sunday morning, Moojan Momen initiated the discussion by voicing some thoughts on working towards a Bahá'í methodology. The main points that he raised were that in some fields such as comparative religion and religious history, the Bahá'í writings did offer the outlines of a methodology through the concepts of progressive revelation, the central place of Divine Revelation in the workings of human history, etc. However, since the field of Bahá'í studies was relatively new ~~and this methodology was relatively new~~ and this methodology was as yet undeveloped, scholars could not be expected simply to adopt it. Certainly, any work using this methodology could not as yet expect to be published in scholarly journals. Nevertheless, a start had to be made at some time and the difficult task of working out the precise implications of a 'Bahá'í methodology' had to be tackled at some stage; why not this present generation of Bahá'í scholars?

On Sunday afternoon, Peter Smith led a discussion on the response of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice to our previous seminar report.

Listing of Priority Needs

During the course of Saturday, it was agreed that it would be useful to compile a list of the priority needs of scholars in the way of primary source materials, research aids and organisational needs. The following list was compiled at an informal session at the Momen's house on Saturday evening:

Primary Source Materials

- 1) Greater access to manuscripts of basic texts. These include tablets of the central figures of the Faith as well as historical manuscripts and documents.
- 2) Greater organisation of local and national archives with active encouragement of local communities to establish and

maintain local archives.

- 3) A programme of identifying and questioning those elderly early believers who may have vital information to impart, as well as assisting such persons to arrange and dispose of whatever papers may be in their possession which are of historical importance.
- 4) Compilation and writing of local and national Bahá'í histories.

Organisational Needs

- 5) Facilitation of the process of review.
- 6) Provision for a centre for Bahá'í studies which would act as a coordinating centre for the efforts of Bahá'í scholars as well as being a suitable institution for the publication of Bahá'í texts and the issuing of bulletins.
- 7) Facilities for printing and publishing of papers.

Research Aids

- 8) Translation and publication of basic texts.
- 9) Contextual research on the basic texts.
- 10) Compilation of concordances, indexes, glossaries and lexicons.
- 11) Production of bibliographies, chronologies, biographical dictionaries, maps, etc.
- 12) Drawing up of guidelines for the questioning of persons as outlined in 3) above.
- 13) Derivation of statistical material.
- 14) Holding of seminars.
- 15) Compilation of registers of scholars involved in studying the Bahá'í Faith.

It was felt that for the primary source materials and organisational needs, Bahá'í scholars were either wholly or partially dependent on the institutions of the Faith. As to the research aids, these are primarily the responsibility of Bahá'í scholars themselves.

It was then decided to determine to what extent those present were engaged, or intended to engage, in the production of these research aids. Peter Smith stated that he was about to produce a new edition of his register of scholars involved in studies on the Bahá'í Faith (available from Peter Smith at £1 each). He was also organising at

least one more Lancaster seminar. Most of those present stated that they had to some extent or other been involved in indexing Bahá'í books. It was realised that this activity was probably going on all around the Bahá'í world in a completely uncoordinated way and with much duplication of effort. There was a report of good indexes to some Bahá'í books having been compiled in Australia or New Zealand, but produced in only very small quantities and not made generally available. It was felt that some international coordination of this activity was desirable. Moojan Momen expressed an interest in acting as editor for the compilation of a dictionary of Bahá'í biography, and one or two of those present volunteered to contribute entries for this.

Discussions

The discussions during the course of the weekend were far-ranging and the following represents only a personal impression of some of the points raised. Some of the discussions were difficult to summarise while others only repeated points made at last year's seminar. The two main areas of discussion were methodology and the question of the scholar's relations with the Bahá'í community.

Stephen Lambden's paper initiated a lengthy discussion on methodology. One of the points that was repeated several times was that there can be no single Bahá'í methodology. The methodology of Bahá'í scholars will vary according to their discipline and approach to the subject and, indeed, will also vary in time as the Bahá'í world achieves deeper insights into the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The discussion on methodology centred on the tension between subjectivity and objectivity which eventually evolved into the time-honoured faith/reason discussion. Methodological agnosticism which had been a centre of discussion last year was dismissed at an early stage and found no support this year, particularly as a result of Stephen Lambden's strong criticism of it and the Research Department's comments. It was felt that the sort of neutrality implied by the concept of methodological agnosticism was impossible to attain. Most agreed with the statement of Stephen Neil quoted above (p. 3).

As pointed out by Stephen in his essay (p.77), even a descriptive phenomenological approach to the object of study must perforce entail subjective factors in the selection of what is to be included and what is to be excluded. The very process of selectivity brings in subjectivity. It was felt that there was a consensus of opinion among scholars in general that along with objectivity, a certain amount of subjective empathy with one's object of study was necessary in order to achieve useful results.

The group were agreed that the aim should be to achieve a reasonable degree of objectivity while being honest about the extent of one's subjectivity. Of course the question of what is a 'reasonable degree' of objectivity was one to which no answer could be given and which would in any case vary from circumstance to circumstance. The important factors were that one must be rigorous and honest in one's use of one's basic materials.

A concrete example was given of the sort of difficulties that faced a Bahá'í scholar: in the controversy between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal, there is almost exact reciprocation of accusations. In all the Bahá'í histories, for example, it is stated that Azal attempted to poison Bahá'u'lláh, while the Azalí accounts state that Bahá'u'lláh attempted to poison Azal. There is no independent, neutral evidence that can be brought into play, and other factors such as the veracity of the sources and the character of the participants etc., depend again on the partiality of the sources referred to. The question is, what should a Bahá'í scholar do in presenting this or any other similar episodes. The possibilities are: a) to stop at this point and declare that it is impossible on the evidence available to decide on the truth of the matter (a course of action which is acceptable as long as it is not repeated too frequently); b) to declare one's bias by coming down on the side of Bahá'u'lláh; or c) to suppress or ignore either all or part of the Azalí case in order to make the Bahá'í account seem more probable and to declare this to be so (a course which the participants felt to be unacceptable but which Bahá'í histories have all too often followed). The participants felt that the implication of the Research Department's response to last year's seminar is that a Bahá'í scholar should take course B). However, some felt that it would not be academically acceptable and would represent a conscious deviation from scholarly standards to allow faith to be the determining factor in making such judgments. This may even lead to a refusal to publish one's material by academic publishers and

editors. Others stated that perhaps Bahá'í scholars are setting too high a standard for themselves in that other scholarly authors are often quite openly partial in their treatment of sources and in their conclusions and that there would be no objection to a Bahá'í scholar being the same. Being honest and rigorous in one's use of sources were more important factors in producing good scholarly work. It was also pointed out that the reason that faith was discredited in academic circles was that too often it was exclusivist and therefore clearly partisan. The Baha'i Faith, however, is much less exclusivist and therefore its approach may be more acceptable in some fields.

A further refinement to the debate was introduced when Moojan Momen suggested that in making a 'jump of faith' and coming down on what seems to be the Bahá'í side in a controversial point, we may indeed be acting erroneously. For none of us are in a position to judge what was going on in the mind of a manifestation of God nor the reasons for his actions. To jump to conclusions, merely as a result of our own assessment of the situation and what we think are the rights and wrongs of a given situation may lead us to false conclusions since the actions of a manifestation of God are complex and even at times paradoxical. An example of this given by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán is the murder committed by Moses. Moreover, the statement that is so frequently made: that we have an infallible source of guidance in the Word of God as given in our sacred writings, is to some extent, irrelevant since as soon as any Bahá'í reads a passage of these writings, he necessarily imposes his own limited understanding on that passage which is often at variance with the understanding of other Bahá'ís and is, in any case, certainly not infallible.

It was recognised that scholars in some fields were much less likely to come up against such problems than others. For example, Peter Smith and Loní Bramson stated that they could foresee few such problems in their dealings with American Bahá'í history. It was suggested that perhaps the wisest course would be for Bahá'í scholars to steer clear ^{areas} of ^{of problem} for the time being. The principal problem areas appear to be the early period of Bahá'í history and also work on the Central Figures of the Faith. It was also suggested that perhaps the Universal House of Justice could be asked to comment on this problem with specific reference to this example of the Bahá'u'lláh-Azal controversy quoted.

The second main area of debate was the question of the scholar's relationship to the Bahá'í community. Much of the discussion went over ground that had been covered the previous year. Much emphasis was placed on the necessity for scholars to communicate with the Bahá'í community since it was primarily the lack of such communication that led to suspicion and mistrust among the Bahá'í community of the aims and results of Bahá'í scholarship. It was also stressed that much tact and wisdom must be displayed in communicating the results of research to the Bahá'í community - a point which is also stressed in the article in Bahá'í News (June 1979). Dr. Ayman pointed out that in the past, theologians and religious historians were also usually priests and thus had obligations to the community as official interpreters of their faith. In the Bahá'í Faith, however, there is a dissociation between scholarship and the holding of office (indeed, office is vested in Assemblies and not in individuals). Thus the Bahá'í scholar is free from the restrictions imposed by the obligations of office. Stephen Lambden, however, at another session of the weekend, pointed out a possible disadvantage of the situation which was that Christian scholars, because of their commitments to their communities, were often in very close touch with the people and could both undertake scholarly work and at the same time preach sermons that reinvigorated the spirit of the layman. Bahá'í scholars were in danger of becoming divorced from the community and ceasing to communicate with it.

Some further points that were raised in the course of the discussions are here listed: a) Dr. Ayman pointed out that the Bahá'í Faith is not a finished entity before us to study, but rather an organic entity that is at a very early stage of growth. Examining it is like looking at a seed and trying to understand what the tree will be like.

b) Dr. Ayman also reminded the participants of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said to the psychologist William James. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said that scientists first put aside the soul and spirit of man and then try to examine what is left. This method, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had told James, would only lead to understanding man as an animal and will not yield the right answers. The result of the lines that James was pursuing is the behaviourist theories that have permeated education and other fields and have led to the idea that man can and should be conditioned and manipulated like an animal. In their study of the Baha'i Faith, Bahá'í scholars should be careful to avoid this separation of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned James.

APPENDIX ONE

Phenomenology, Methodological Agnosticism and Apologetica - Robert Parry

c) The question is often asked as to how the present generation of Bahá'í scholars views its relationship to previous generations, most notable of whom was Mírzá Abu'l-Faḡl. One answer to this that was suggested was that Mírzá Abu'l-Faḡl was essentially engaged in apologetic scholarship based on the Eastern tradition of citing, transmitting and embellishing previous authorities. What the present generation of Western scholars was seeking to do was different. It involves academic scholarship based on the Western tradition of critical analysis of primary source materials.

d) The question of review was once again discussed on Sunday afternoon. Although the necessity for review was recognised, it was felt that there were particular difficulties for scholars both with respect to the ability to find suitable reviewers and the implications the review carries for publication. It was decided to refer some of the points raised to the Universal House of Justice.

In conclusion, it was felt that the discussions of the weekend had been fruitful and it was provisionally decided to hold another seminar in a year's time in addition to the Lancaster seminar which is to be held 11-13 April 1980. It was also decided to write to the House of Justice thanking them for their response to last year's seminar and raising certain questions which were raised during the course of the discussions this year (see Appendix 2).

Mo'jan Momen
Cambridge
19 September 1979

The Phenomenological method with its offshoot, methodological agnosticism have been suggested as a viable 'Bahá'í methodology'. Before embarking on a cursory analysis of this method, it will be well to clarify the scope of the term phenomenology, and since we are interested in phenomenology in relation to religion, that too must be clarified. Phenomenology of religion can mean at least three things each of which has loosely developed from the first. The philosophical school founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), with its complex analysis of consciousness providing the basic methodology for the approach to religious phenomena constitutes the first meaning. Understood in this way, phenomenology of religion would be part of the phenomenological philosophy as applied to religion. Secondly, we move away from the philosophers to the historians of religion. These men have applied phenomenological methods in a broader manner to the study of the history of religions, being concerned with the symbolic, mythical and ritualistic forms of religious expression rather than the more developed theological, doctrinal and conceptual expressions. In this second sense, phenomenology of religion would be that part of the history of religions which utilised in a broad manner phenomenological methods. The third sense of phenomenology of religion comprises the most general application of phenomenological methodology to the whole spectrum of religious activities - myth making, theologising, philosophising, institutions, customs, ceremonials, etc. Here, perhaps we are furthest away from the material object of Husserl's phenomenology, though formally points of contact remain as with any move from the specific to the general.

The phenomenological method is a way of describing rather than a way of explaining. When examining a religious phenomenon one can say "as a sociologist, I say we have here an example of social stratification, but as a religious person we have a clear example of God's work." Such an attitude is schizophrenic and is at one remove from the data. Phenomenological description seeks not an analysis of the data from one standpoint (perspective) or another but an adequate description of the data as they present themselves to the consciousness of the phenomenologist. Remaining within a particular perspective tells us only about the perspective, thus phenomenology demands an abandoning perspectives such that one does not speak 'as a sociologist' or 'as a religious person' but as an honest observer in the world, confronting each situation without pre-established criteria. Just as empirical method is rejected because

of its reductionist tendencies, so too is the deductive method in logic. Phenomenological method proceeds not from the logical development of basic ideas, concepts or truths, neither from an axiom with its deduced corollaries pushing out in all directions, but from the description of elements that appear to consciousness. Thus true description resists the temptation to make assumptions and resists any attempts to make descriptions of facts consistent with assumptions and what must be inferred from them. As is obvious, this aspect of phenomenological method has serious implications for the study of religion. So too does another major concept - phenomenological reduction. In the task of describing, phenomenology employs a method called reduction. Put simply, the reductive operation is the 'bracketing out' of the question of existence in order to devote attention to the question of meaning. Husserl uses the Greek work epoché to denote the deliberate elimination of the contingent and the consideration as irrelevant any form of existential positing of that which appears. Only the appearance is retained to become more and more emphatically present to consciousness.

It was said the question of truth as 'actually being the case' is 'bracketed out' in favour of the question of meaning. If I say 'I believe that the Kitáb-i-Íqán is the Word of God,' the phenomenologist would 'bracket out' the question of whether or not the statement refers to something over and above the state of the proposer's mind, and instead concentrates on the meaning of 'believe'. Equally, instead of considering whether or not the Kitáb-i-Íqán is actually the Word of God, it 'brackets out' that question and asks what is meant by 'Word of God', and meaning 'intention' is grasped through intuition or realisation.

Another major concept is essence or universal, since the object of phenomenological cognition is an essence or a universal. So, for philosophical phenomenology, description is not of concrete particulars, whereas for a looser phenomenology, it could be of concrete particulars (e.g. an institution or ritual practice). By essence the phenomenologist means general terms, such as table, or man, or justice, where these refer not to this or that table, man or act of justice but to a genus or type - table-ness, man-ness (or human-ness) or justice as such. Phenomenology seeks to avoid the question of the status of universals or essences in terms of their reality or ideality, nevertheless it does affirm that we have universal ideas, for example, man, mankind, justice, etc. It attempts a description of the content of such essences and sets aside the question of their actual 'location'. The essence is not to be found by referring to a preconceived notion of what is really real but by bracketing out any questions of origin or status so that phenomena may present themselves.

Put simply, what is sought is meaning rather than cause, origin or truth.

Now it is clear from this cursory outline of philosophical phenomenology that an application to a religious phenomena would involve utilising the central concepts of description and phenomenological reduction (epoché) with a view to apprehending essences. We will set aside for a moment the quest for essences, which for those historians of religion who utilised broad phenomenological methods meant describing and finding some common meaning to religious data such as sacrifice, ritual, prayer, etc., and concentrate on the implications of phenomenological description and bracketing. Both concepts are involved in methodological agnosticism, a term used by Smart in his The Phenomenon of Religion to describe a method of approaching religious phenomena. One suspends judgment as to the truth or 'location' of the phenomena in question and merely describes what is present or appears to consciousness. Only this way can a fair deal be given to plural cultures in the process of interaction. The suspension of judgment as to the truth or location of the phenomena corresponds to the method of bracketing existence. However, 'agnosticism' in methodological agnosticism is misleading for it gives implications of doubting, whereas for Husserl suspension of belief in existence is distinguished from doubting. This is a minor matter. One temporarily, for the sake of describing what is before consciousness, suspends personal judgment on the truth or location of the phenomena under scrutiny. Thus Bahá'u'lláh is neither affirmed or denied as a Manifestation of God in actuality nor affirmed nor denied as a product of the 'greater environing reality' - society in actuality, nor both in actuality. The history of the Bábí-Bahá'í movement is ~~neither~~ ^{neither} affirmed nor denied as the intelligible activity of a loving, caring, transcendent source in actuality, nor affirmed nor denied as a purely social phenomenon nourished by messianic ideas in actuality, nor both in actuality. Both poles of the two pairs seek to go beyond what is present to consciousness to some kind of location. Methodological agnosticism abhors both moves.

Now I propose that methodological agnosticism and the phenomenological method which is its philosophical rationale, are inadequate in relation to the question of the Bahá'í revelation. At present I will not distinguish between various areas of enquiry corresponding to various features of the Bahá'í revelation, such as theological and philosophical analysis of the content of the teachings, historical and sociological study of the development, and descriptions of various individuals of significance to the development of the Bahá'í Faith. Instead I will concentrate on the concept 'Bahá'í revelation' and associate it with another concept 'the Word of God'. So far the

phenomenologist would be with me. We have isolated two major concepts - the revelatory nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and its origin as the Word of God. The historian of religion who utilises phenomenological method broadly would affirm that the Bahá'í Faith claims revelatory status and claims to be the Word of God, and he would suspend judgment as to the truth or falsity of these claims. The strict philosophical phenomenologist would likewise bracket out any attempt at locating these claims and concentrate on gaining a clearer apprehension through the analysis of the meaning of 'revelation' (as concept) and 'Word of God' (a concept). He would do this utilising a procedure called 'free imaginative variation' (better known in English philosophy as counter example).

Here the concepts of 'revelation' and 'Word of God' are described as best as possible and then the description is transformed by adding or taking away one of the predicates contained in the description. With each addition or deletion the phenomenologist asks whether the amended description can still be said to describe an example of the same kind of object as that which the initial example was said to exemplify. The addition or deletion of a predicate may give rise to a different example from that exemplified by the original example. Or an addition or deletion may not affect the essential features of the kind of object exemplified by the different examples. In this way the necessary and invariant features that the examples must possess to be examples of those kinds of things are discovered. Likewise, accidental and thus irrelevant features are also discovered. Thus, with this procedure the essence of 'Word of God' and 'revelation' is supposedly discovered. It is basically this - that there is an essential (necessary and invariant) relation between revelation - Word of God and whatever statements have been derived through free imaginative variation. Nothing about the truth or location of 'revelation' or 'Word of God' is affirmed, only the internal relation between example and determining attributes, which are then adequately described and the task completed.

I suggest that such a methodology is inadequate simply because from the point of view of Bahá'í analysis, it is the believer who commences the questioning, the one to whom something definite has been spoken prior to any questioning. What has been spoken to the believing Bahá'í is a complex whole, what we could and will call the Word of God, the Bahá'í revelation. This complex whole is structured but it is not initially experienced as something structured. It is only after reflection that we determine the structure as outlined above (e.g. theological, sociological, historical features). Prior to this the Bahá'í revelation presents itself as something to be accepted or rejected, something in which our judgment is involved, something about which we must decide for or against, true or false. For the believer these

conditions have been fulfilled, the revelation has been accepted, a positive decision made as to its truth-value. The significance of this lies in the fact that the believer acknowledges the Bahá'í Revelation - Word of God to actually be the case, to actually obtain. Borrowing Husserl's term 'horizon' one could say that the believer's horizon has been transformed completely by the acknowledged truth of the revelation. This being so there can be no standpoint within the horizon wherein the believer can suspend judgment and somehow detach himself in phenomenological discourse. Distance cannot be achieved simply because as Bahá'ís we are already existing within a unique horizon. One not constructed out of propositions or sentences where it is always possible to achieve some distance, but a horizon of experience, acceptance, decision, and resolve. The believer is always pushing through and continuously acknowledging the truth and relevance of the revelation in his life and does not remain on the level of description and suspension of judgment. Bernard Lanergan, a Catholic philosopher, who has worked in detail on methodology, believes that conversion (or in our terms transformation), which he considers as three dimensional consisting of an intellectual, moral and religious component, is basic to the religious life, determining and being determined by the very horizon of the existing believer. Interestingly enough, intellectual conversion which he further considers as the subject's 'orientation to the intelligible and to the true' freeing the one so converted from confusing the 'criteria of the world of immediacy with the criteria of the world mediated by meaning', demands going beyond among other things phenomenology to deal with criteria of sufficient evidence or sufficient reason. Moral conversion is the orientation of the subject to the good and the pursuit of value, and religious conversion the orientation of the person to God. Thus, because of the engagement of the whole person in acknowledging the truth of the Bahá'í revelation - Word of God, and because its truth is explicitly and overtly acknowledged as being part of the believer's own self-understanding, the neutral standpoint of phenomenology and methodological agnosticism must be seen as a suspension, perhaps even an evasion of the believer's task of appropriation, self-understanding and communication. A radical change in horizon can only lead in the believer to an acknowledgment of that change; phenomenology will only describe the radical change without committing itself either way, thus disengaging itself from the significance of the change - notably its quality as a personal address to the whole man.

Given the inadequacy of phenomenological method - methodological agnosticism I suggest that we are faced with a much more difficult task, which I have called apologetics (the name is insignificant). Its basic orientation is

outwards towards a world that has not yet been addressed. This is basically what the traditional apologetic enterprise was all about though it tended to involve frenetic and self-conscious defence of the faith (Christian). I admit that the defence or reply aspect of apologetics will have to develop and that it will be primarily a response to demands for clarity from the 'outside world'. However, I feel apologetics should develop from the experience from existing Baha'is from within the Baha'i horizon, that is, from the 'inside', so to speak, as they encounter the world in which they live.

Apologetics comprises the seeking to bring to expression the encounter with the Word of God, the Baha'i revelation. It is a continuing process undergone by responsible members of a believing community and should not be a representing in static, authoritarian form, an ideological framework which would be unresponsive not only to human experience as it stands but also to fresh experiences as they arise. Thus the apologetic enterprise emphasises the continuity with the human situation not its discontinuity, only then can a dialogical relationship be established - anything else would be shouting. Apologetics is not shouting neither is it passive listening to the criteria of the 'world' - it is responsible engagement. Responsible, because it strikes at clarity and is undergone in responsibility and honesty by responsible believers; engagement because it is not afraid - what is continuous with the Word - the Bahá'í Revelation, i.e. a world conditioned by the possibility of being addressed cannot be a fearful prospect. Bahá'í scholarship working from within a Bahá'í horizon must be a continuing act of correlation, it must participate in the activity of correlating questions implicit in the human situation (the 'World') with 'answers' given in the Bahá'í revelation. Again this presupposes a continuity between something to which a Word of God has been directly spoken and something to which a Word of God will be spoken. It is at the frontier between the individual believer and the 'unbelieving' yet addressable world that apologetics will operate its work of mediation. Once this is recognised the task is an adequate and true mapping out of this continuity. It demands a responsibility that can only come from working within a particular existential horizon because a subject is at stake not an object (i.e. a description of phenomena). For us this is the horizon of one who has responsibly accented Bahá'u'lláh, the one who has faith. Even this act must be mediated and adequately mapped. The content of this mapping and mediation may take numerous forms, that is its methods and perspectives could be many - Bahá'í textual analysis (our main resource), existentialism, cognitional analysis, process theology, hermeneutical studies (including the work of Ebeling, Fuchs, and Buri). Each of these methods will be limited but at least their

tasks and intentions derive from a believing subject. I personally believe that existentialism, cognitional analysis and hermeneutical studies, especially the New Hermeneutics which has emphasised the linguistic nature of self understanding, and cognitional analysis which has attempted a thematisation of our cognitive operations (what am I doing when I am confessing Bahá'u'lláh) are important resources. Nevertheless, Bahá'í scholarship, whatever way it develops, will, I feel, be recognisable not because it utilises a particular method or methods nor because it constructs a recognisable system (a Thomistic, Transcendental or Existential ontology) but because it is work done by a particular kind of person. Thus there is no Bahá'í method. The question of methodology or methodologies because the question of a qualitative existence. Just as man has no privileged access to himself without the revelation, no one methodology or methodologies gives us privileged access to the revelation.

APPENDIX TWO

58 Birdwood Road
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12 October 1979

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Dear Baha'i Friends,

The participants at the second Cambridge Bahá'í Studies Seminar on Methodology and Ethics, held on 15-15 September 1979 have asked me to write to you expressing their gratitude for your response to the report of last year's seminar and also raising with you a number of problems that arose out of the discussion of this year:

- 1) In the letter from the Department of the Secretariat dated 3 January 1979, which accompanied the Research Department's comments on last year's seminar report, there is a statement to the effect that the policy has been established not to require review for doctoral theses unless 'there is a proposal to publish them in larger quantities than is required by the examining body.' It was pointed out that through such institutions as University Microfilms and the Inter-Library Loan System, it was common for Ph.D. candidates to sign a statement allowing copies of their theses to be reproduced for the use of other scholars working in similar fields. Although it is theoretically possible to restrict circulation of one's thesis, this is usually only done for exceptional reasons, and in the case of the University of London, for example, the candidate can only apply to have this done for a period which does not normally exceed five years, after which the thesis becomes freely available. All of this, of course, represents publication of the thesis in 'larger quantities than is required by the examining body', although the method used is just photographic reproduction and does not involve printing the thesis. If this sort of 'publication' would then require the work to be reviewed, this might create some difficulties for Ph.D. candidates in the presenting of their theses to their universities.
- 2) In the past, we have circulated photocopies of seminar papers, reports and other materials and even sent copies of these to the Universal House of Justice. However, the question was raised whether all material, whatever its format, should not be subject to review before being circulated among Bahá'ís. Such a necessity would, of course, be both awkward and time consuming.

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Universal House of Justice

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- 3) The question was once again raised concerning the review of scholarly works and how it can be possible for a work that is the result of several years' research including the reading of many texts that are not generally available to be reviewed by persons who have not done the work that the author has done on the book. It was proposed that a possible solution to this difficulty would be to divide Bahá'í books into two categories: firstly, those books which are to be regarded as official expressions of Bahá'í doctrine and views, and secondly, those works which are to be considered the personal opinion of the author. The first category would be reviewed with regard to both the correctness of the presentation of the Faith in the book and the protection of the Faith from attacks due to statements made in the book. The second category would be reviewed only with regard to the protection of the Faith (including, of course, where accurate presentation comes into protection). In this way, reviewers would be relieved of the well-nigh impossible task of judging the correctness of the opinions of a scholar who may have done years of work to reach these conclusions.
- 4) It was decided to ask concerning the level of authority of the comment of the Research Department especially in view of the fact that substantially the same comments were later reprinted in Bahá'í News under the heading 'A Message from the Universal House of Justice'. It was further felt that some clarification was needed regarding other material emanating from the World Centre under various departmental headings and whether Bahá'ís should regard these in the same way as they would regard material coming from the Universal House of Justice itself and under its own signature.
- 5) We would invite your comments on the controversy between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal (pp. 10-11 of the enclosed report) which is a specific example of one of the more difficult problems facing Bahá'í scholars.
- 6) It was felt by several participants that it would be very useful if the Universal House of Justice were to share with us a selection of quotations from the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of scholarship.

Yours in His Service,

Moojan Momen