Method in Religious Studies: Theistic and Agnostic

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Method in Religious Studies:

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The following commentary has been elicited by a parenthetical statement I found when rereading Dr. Christopher Buck’s favourable review of Moojan Momen’s The Phenomenon of Religion (Oneworld: 1999) in the Bahá’í Studies Review. Dr. Buck’s assertion, while it is made only en passant, is stated as a matter of fact. In his introductory comment on the phenomenology of religion, and in his discussion of the terminology that has been applied to the academic study of religion, he writes: “The problem with the latter term [religious studies] is that it is somewhat misleading in that, while the object of study is “religious,” the methodology is not.[1] In fairness to Christopher Buck, I realise that a book review is not the place to make explicit one’s views on methodology. But the parenthetical assertion is heavily consequential and has prompted the following response.

It is the matter-of-fact nature of his assertion that is being questioned here. The implications of his parenthesis for methodology in religious studies in general and Bahá’í studies in particular are considerable. Behind the brief assertion looms a very large and complex methodological question, which has been much debated, and for which no clear consensus has yet emerged. It is not clear whether or not Dr. Buck’s statement is description or prescription. But the statement, whether it can be “owned” by Dr. Buck or not, tends to mislead for three reasons: (1) It does not represent the methodological views of all scholars engaged in the academic study of religion, whether they are Bahá’ís or not. (2) It would appear to affirm a consensus regarding the non-religious nature of the methodology involved in the academic study of religion which is clearly not the case. (3) In my view, such a statement, if applied to Bahá’í studies, would not be consonant with either the motivation and/or the methodology that is employed, or should be employed, by Bahá’í scholars. The reviewer’s categorical assertion, while it would no doubt be endorsed by certain members within the academy, is nonetheless at odds with the views of a number of non-Bahá’í scholars in the field and, more importantly, by the statements on methodology published by the Universal House

of Justice.

However, it must be said that Dr. Buck's parenthetical statement does accurately represent one leg of the methodology employed in religious studies, i.e. the humanistic, agnostic or "scientific" approach. The other leg of that methodology is a faith-driven or theological approach, usually implicit, which makes good use at the same time of scientific approaches to the study of religion. For this statement must necessarily follow from the reviewer's comment: if the method used by scholars in religion is not religious, then what is it? Clearly, this is an allusion to the humanistic or historical-critical, even atheistic methods. What is not clear from the parenthetical statement is what it does not say, i.e., how the putative non-religious methodology might affect normative, faith-driven or theological approaches to the study of religion which have a long-standing and well-established history connected with every world religion and which are clearly germane to any study of the Bahá'í Faith.

To refer to the more recent history of the discipline, it is a well-known fact — and in this we can agree with the reviewer — that objective or scientific approaches have been promoted and adopted by a number of scholars in religious studies since the late nineteenth century. With such moderate approaches to the scientific or academic study of religion, such as the manifesto of the IAHR (International Association for the History of Religions) and published in the periodical Numen by the Religionswissenschaftler in the 1950's,[2] a Bahá'í would have no quarrel. As we know, scientific method is upheld by both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as a basic Bahá'í belief, although interpretations may differ as to how precisely this principle should be applied to the study of the Bahá'í Faith. In terms of scholarly inquiry, scientific method must refer, at least, to an orderly, in-depth or systematic inquiry and a familiarity with academic methods and materials.

One of the leading exponents of scientific method in religion, albeit in extremis, is that of Professor Donald Wiebe, professor in the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College, University of Toronto. My reference to Dean Wiebe's views is not meant to imply that they have been adopted by Christopher Buck. But they do serve to alert us to the extremes that scientific methodology, when too rigorously applied to the academic study of religion, will reach. (Wiebe's view have been contested by several notable scholars of religion). Wiebe, for example, argues strongly that theology and other experiential, faith-based forms of discourse must be rigidly excluded from the academic study of religion when he speaks, in the name of science, of theology infecting religious studies: "[theology] that can only infect the academic study of religion."[3] In radically purist language, Wiebe describes religious studies as being committed to "...an objective, detached, scientific understanding of religion wholly uninfected by any sentiment of religiosity."[4] The so-called scientific, humanistic approach to the study of religion is not at odds, then, with the theological method for what it includes but rather for what it excludes. The danger of touting scientific or

“academic” approaches to the study of religion, when these are not examined closely, or carefully qualified, creates an advocacy that would undermine, minimise and sanitize the very basis of faith-driven studies of religion, including that of the Bahá’í Faith.

Wiebe’s view of theology, however, is extremely narrow. It excludes, understandably, not only large C confessional normative approaches to religious studies, such as we find in church denominational universities or colleges, but also small c theistic assumptions, i.e., those that assume the existence of God and/or faith — and this would certainly include, or more exactly exclude, a belief in the authority of prophethood or divine revelation — as the point of departure for their academic reflections. But scientific humanistic approaches go even further. They exclude any a priori belief, not only in God and the reality of faith, but also in such abstruse and more universal metaphysical categories as the Ultimate, Mystery or the One since these, so they argue, cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny.

Thus Wiebe wrote in an article in 1984 which—and his later articles still represent the same extreme view: “The a priori acceptance of (or belief in) the reality and existence of the Ultimate is, on the other hand, a species of religious thinking and, if it is to be called theology at all, ought to be referred to as “confessional theology ...I reiterate here that theology, when it commits itself to the existence of the Ultimate, constitutes a form of religious thought that can only infect the academic study of religion and not complement it.”[5] This statement goes well beyond Ninian Smart’s advocacy of methodological agnosticism to land us squarely in secular (atheistic) humanism applied to the study of religion.

A few brief considerations are in order regarding the oft-made appeal to scientific methodology in religion. Those who laud the benefits of the scientific method for the study of religion do so because of the authority conferred by the post-Enlightenment prestige of the physical sciences and mathematics with their high degree of cognitive certainty. But such facile adoptions of the scientific index have been critiqued by scientists themselves and also by philosophers such as Harvard’s Willard Quine. Physicists of our time like Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr and Ludwig Boltzmann have made it clear that the cognitive certainties of science are made within the interpretive frameworks that scientists themselves have established, and even chosen, and that these interpretive frameworks may exclude one another while being nonetheless mutually true. In addition to the famous light-wave particle experiments, the systems of Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry is the other well-know case in point. The Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometric systems reached mutually contradictory conclusions, but were internally consistent and correct.

This does not mean, of course, that a scholar should not pursue scientific certainty. But we should be reminded that where it does exist, it does not exist in every context; only in particular contexts that are internally consistent. For those who seek scientific certainty in religion, it must come

in the form of sound and persuasive argument that has a non-absolute character. But this certainty is to be found within particular contexts which must show themselves to be consistent with their premises. ‘ Abdu’l-Bahá’s familiar “ definition” of faith is pertinent here. If faith is “conscious knowledge,”[6] then it can be allied to scientific approaches to the study of religion. In the Bahá’í view, and unlike the views of some proponents of scientific method in religion, faith-driven and scientific approaches are not antagonistic. They can be profitably used in complement, as the complementary nature of religion and science would imply. All knowledge, if it is self-conscious, organised and directed has a scientific character.

The pertinence of the contexuality of scientific statements, be they secular or religious, did not escape the notice of Mr. Ian Semple who accurately observed in an article published in this journal:

Understandably, the rigid modernist views of science has been challenged by postmodern philosophers who perceive that much of what has been accepted as the objective truth is, in fact, culturally produced, including the categories into which facts are marshalled. Only when these categories are confronted by facts they cannot explain does change in the structure of scientific thought occur. Thomas Kuhn, an important writer in this field, has referred to such changes as paradigm shifts.[7]

The sense of the inexplicable, or the mysterious, far from being anti-scientific, may actually lead to an increase of scientific knowledge. As for feeling “infecting” science, the viewpoint of Albert Einstein was that a religious spirit should accompany the scientific attitude which he identified with “religious feeling” in the form of “rapturous amazement.” Einstein also believed that implicit to the work of the scientist — and this viewpoint can also be applied to the work of the scholar — is a definite ethical component:

His [the scientist’s] religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. This feeling is the guiding principle of his life and work, in so far as he succeeds in keeping himself from the shackles of selfish desire. It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages.[8]

Now Einstein cannot serve as an authority in matters religious, but his statement does strongly inveigh against those who would sanitize feeling from the scientific study of religion, whether that study concern the motivation behind methodological considerations or other forms of discourse.

But to come more to the point. Contrary to Dr. Buck’s affirmation, whether he is advocating it or not, the methodology for many respected scholars of religion is specifically religious. Because of considerations of space, I will mention here just two scholars who have advocated this point of view. One is the Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith, of whom the respected philosopher of

religion John Hick wrote in an influential essay had been responsible "...more than any other single individual, for the change which has taken place within a single generation in the way in which many of us perceive the religious life of mankind."[9]

In his 1983 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, Smith argued that the academic study of religion was in itself a form of religious faith, if not a rival to religious practice. For this influential scholar, religious faith, which no doubt includes sentiment or motivation, was inherent to the academic study of religion. The other proponent of this view, inter alia, is Robert N. Bellah and his "symbolic realism" which, he maintains, when applied to the academic study of religion is both (academically) sound, and self-consciously religious. Bellah goes so far as to say that such a position is "...is the only adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion."[10]

Whether one agrees with Smith and Bellah or not (and their views have been roundly criticised), this much is clear — they look upon the academic study of religion as having an intrinsic religious motivation. Aside from Cantwell Smith and Bellah, some of the greatest luminaries in the entire field of theology and the history of religions/comparative religion such as Max Müller, Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Joachim Wach, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joseph Kitagawa, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich favoured an interpenetration of the theological and historical/phenomenological/existentialist approaches.

But in a more properly Bahá'í context, there are other reasons, ones that have been addressed by the Universal House of Justice in its pronouncements on methodology. While the readers of this journal are no doubt familiar with them, they bear repetition for the present argument. When applied to Bahá'í studies, the statement that the methodology of the study of religion is not religious contradicts explicit scriptural statements and certain methodological pronouncements made by the Universal House of Justice.

Lest someone think that I make an argument strictly on appeal to authority, I would point out that I am also intellectually persuaded, not only by the statements of the House on this point, but also by what non-Bahá'í scholars in the field have had to say about the secular-spiritual interface. The statement that the method of religious studies is (paradoxically) not religious, would appear to be a facile adoption of one stream only of the academy's assumption that secular, humanistic knowledge must have the final word in all domains, even—and this is a supreme irony — in those that are intrinsically religious.

It is not without reason that the Universal House of Justice has pointed to the deleterious effects that certain secular humanistic approaches may have, in their extreme forms, when applied to the study of the Bahá'í Faith: "The danger Bahá'í scholars must avoid is the distortion of religious truth, almost forcibly at times, to make it conform to understandings and perceptions

current in the scientific world....” In a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly dated 21 July, 1968, the House of Justice wrote:

While it may often be the part of wisdom to approach individuals or an audience from a standpoint of current knowledge, it should never be overlooked that the Revelation and the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God’s Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited. Likewise, attempting to make the Bahá’í Faith relevant to modern society is to incur the grave risk of compromising the fundamental verities of our Faith in an effort to make it conform to current theories and practices.”[11]

It should be said that the Bahá’í Faith is indeed relevant to modern society and the statement of the Universal House of Justice suggests, in context, that the attempt at relevancy, when forced, is made to the detriment of the integrity of Bahá’í teachings and its methods. However the most strongly worded statement on methodology made by the Universal House of Justice is the following and it speaks negatively, if not condemns, any form of scholarship that would divest the Bahá’í Faith of the specifically religious character of its methodology. It should be pointed out that the context which gave rise to this statement (and others) was a controversial intramural discussion among a group of scholars which led eventually to the resignation of a few. However, since the Universal House of Justice has chosen to publish these statements, it seems safe to assume that they were deemed to have some long-term bearing on academic scholarship:

The impression given is that, in attempting to achieve what they understand to be academic objectivity, they have inadvertently cast the Faith into a mould which is essentially foreign to its nature, taking no account of the spiritual forces which Bahá’ís see as its foundation. Presumably, the justification offered for this approach would be that most scholars of comparative religion are essentially concerned with discernible phenomena, observable events and practical affairs and are used to treating their subject from a western, if not a Christian, viewpoint. This approach, although understandable, is quite impossible for a Bahá’í, for it ignores the fact that our world-view includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence, and it does not beseem a Bahá’í to write ....about his Faith as if he looked upon it from the norm of humanism or materialism. In other words, we are presented in such articles with the spectacle of Bahá’ís trying to write as if they were non-Bahá’ís. This leads these authors drawing conclusions and making implications which are in conflict with Bahá’í teachings and with the reality of the Faith.[12]

But apart from these pronouncements, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the work of the Bahá’í scholar is intrinsically religious. Bahá’u’lláh has written in his most holy book: “O people of Bahá! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation — such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship

of the one true God. Reflect, O people, on the grace and blessings of your Lord, and yield Him thanks at eventide and dawn."[13] In light of this text, which has been formulaically restated as "work is worship," how can a fully-engaged scholar claim that his or her work is anything but religious?

This commentary points to a need, more or less urgent, for Bahá'í scholars to make explicit the methodology that they employ in Bahá'í studies. David Tracy has made the following observation for scholars working within the Christian tradition, but it seems to me that it applies equally well to Bahá'í scholars. Each scholar, Tracey advocates, should be prepared to "...articulate and defend an explicit method of inquiry, and use that method to interpret the symbols and texts of our common life...."[14] Such an exercise would hopefully prove useful in helping to dispel the misunderstandings that Bahá'í scholars sometimes face in their serious and painstaking efforts to articulate the meaning of the Bahá'í revelation to the larger community.

Notes

The Bahá'í Studies Review, vol. 9, 1999/2000, p. 219.

As summarized by Anne Marie Schimmel in the "Summary of the Discussion," in Numen, vol. 7, 1960, pp. 235-39.

Quoted by Wiebe's opponent in the debate on methodology, Charles Davis. "Wherein there is no ecstasy," Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, vol. 13, no. 4, 1984, p. 393.

ibid.

"The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion," Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, vol. 13, no. 4, 1984, p. 421.

"By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds." Bahá'í World Faith, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1943), p. 383. The context is the interaction of knowledge and action.

Mr. Ian Semple, "Knowledge and the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh" in The Bahá'í Studies Review, vol. 9, 1999/2000, p. 3.

Albert Einstein, "The Religious Spirit of Science" in Ideas and Opinions (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1954), p. 50.

John Hick, "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" in John Hick, editor Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 418.

R.N. Bellah, "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, vol. 9, 1970, p. 93.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, June 7, 1983 to an individual, published in Scholarship Mona Vale, N.S.W. :Bahá'í

Publications Australia, 1995), pp. 36-7.

Scholarship, p. 37.

The Kitáb-I-Aqdas, & 33.

The context is the study of the Christian faith but the statement is germane to Bahá'í studies. David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 3.

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