

More problems....Scientific method or a total hermeneutics? 1

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The 'problem of method' continues to be a favorite concern of the academic world. Thus it is no surprise that it has also played a prominent role in discussions of those involved in Babi and Baha'i studies, as reflected in the Cambridge seminars on ethics and methodology held in the late 1970's, the widely circulated statement of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice on scholarship and method, and, now, the several articles and rejoinders that have appeared in the Baha'i Studies Bulletin. Denis MacEoin has ably pointed out many of the hurdles that face a Baha'i who wishes to pursue scholarly research of his or her faith, and I, for one, find his insights extremely useful and refreshing, if somewhat exaggerated and, therefore, at times wide of the mark. With this paper, I wish to directly address but one of the issues MacEoin has raised, viz., the efficacy of an historical method which calls for a self-purging of one's subjective biases when studying religion, while taking only a side-glance at the more volatile topic of whether or not the Baha'i religion with its present-day administrative policies places an insurmountable barrier before the believing scholar. It is particularly the hermeneutical task of interpreting religious texts that I wish to concentrate

on and the tensions that exist between historians and phenomenologists in contemporary religious studies. In doing so, I hope to highlight some of the limits of MacEoin's proposed methodology for study of Babism and Baha'ism. I will also argue that in our academic work on Babism and Baha'ism we must not lose sight of their fundamental mode of being as religious phenomenon.

To refresh our memories, MacEoin, following Popper, holds that there is an "objective or absolute truth" which, however, is an unattainable goal; nevertheless our advancing scientific theories help us to formulate "approximations rather than final statements about the truth" (BSB, 1, no. 4, p. 70). And further, the scholar "must proceed by methods that are rational, critical, open to criticism, universal and as free from subjective bias as it is possible to render them" (ibid., my emphasis). Because we have all been nurtured in the modern world with its devotion to science and technology, MacEoin's statement may seem nothing more than common sense, whereas to think in other terms one must either be a hopeless romantic, or possibly an adherent to a modern sect-type religion. Furthermore, I suspect that many Baha'is with academic backgrounds will find MacEoin's statements on method generally acceptable and attempt to adopt a similar approach in their research. In what follows, I would like to direct our attention to the related problems of (1) the efficacy of a science-inspired method in the human studies, that (2) strives for the subjugation of subjective biases or prejudices, in order to (3) attain closer approximations of objective or absolute truth.

In the study of religion today there exists an inevitable tension between historians who approach their field of specialization with the scientific method extolled by MacEoin and phenomenologists who strive for a 'total hermeneutics'. Robert Parry has briefly described the phenomenological method stemming from the work of Edmund Husserl and how the phenomenological reduction (epoché), or methodological agnosticism, is inadequate for a believer to utilize when studying his or her faith (R. Parry, "Phenomenology, Methodological Agnosticism and Apologetics",

Report of the Bahai Studies Seminar, Cambridge 1979, Appendix 1). Parry notes that there are several trends in phenomenology moving away from Husserl, and the phenomenology of religion that strives for a total hermeneutics of homo religiosus is probably the farthest away from its venerable founder. This form of phenomenology does not accept that methodological agnosticism in any of its manifestations is useful for penetrating into the essence of the symbols and myths of scripture and worship. I would suggest that it is not the reduction which is central to phenomenology, but rather the more general exhortation of "return to the things themselves" that all phenomenologists adopt in their investigations.² For phenomenology of religion, then, 'religious facts' are not revealed in their essential nature by a historical method, which can only see them as 'merely subjective' or as 'irrefutable metaphysical God-talk'. In stark contrast to the objective study attempted by historical method, phenomenology of religion recognizes that to study religious facts--i.e. the sacred and absolute values of homo religiosus as conveyed via symbols, myths and rituals--is to open up to these facts in such fashion that a transformation occurs within the researcher. Expressions of the sacred are thus grasped by the phenomenologist as essential structures of human being-in-the-world which require a special hermeneutics. These religious facts are not simply of historical interest, revealing something of a primitive ~~or~~ superseded past, "but", remarks Mircea Eliade, "they disclose fundamental existential situations that are directly relevant to modern man" (The Quest, preface). Phenomenological study naturally leads to an inner transformation of the researcher and, hopefully, of his or her reader as well. Eliade continues by observing that "What is called the phenomenology and history of religions can be considered among the very few humanistic disciplines that are at the same time propaedeutic and spiritual techniques" (ibid.).

Similarly, W. Brede Kristensen has pointed out how in our investigations of the essence of religious facts we must make use of our own religious experience if we are to understand another's. To study religion requires more than purely logical

and rational methods since to penetrate into an alien religious worldview we must rely on intuitions and anticipations derived from our own experience. Phenomenological study, notes Kristensen, "does not take place outside our personality. And the reverse will also prove to be the case: the study exerts an influence on our personality. This gives a personal character and value to the research....An appeal is made to our feeling for the subjects which we want to understand, a feeling which gives...a sureness to our touch....There is simply no doubt that we grow during our scientific work; when religion is the subject of our work, we grow religiously" (The Phenomenology of Religion, ed. Joseph Dabney Bettis, pp 45-46).

One of the most persuasive rebuttals of an historical method based on the natural sciences comes from Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's work is hermeneutic phenomenology firmly rooted in the philosophical adventure initiated by Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In Truth and Method, he develops at length his views on the shortcomings of modern historical studies and the need for a less scientific approach, yet one that is grounded in rigorous thinking whose goal is understanding of truths. Thus he shifts our focus away from techniques and methods of interpretation which assume that interpretation is a scientific process aimed at exhaustive analysis of texts as objects/artifacts towards the clarification of interpretation as a dialogical event that in its very nature is episodic and non-objective. Episodic because every 'act' of interpretation is a moment embedded in a tradition of which neither the text nor the interpreter has a complete view. Non-objective because it is not satisfied with making explicit what is merely already in the text, but seeks to recapture the perspective within which the text emerged and then to have a dialogue with it so that there is a fusion of horizons or perspectives. Method is simply incapable of revealing all the possible implications of a text; it only renders explicit the kind of understanding already implicit in the method. That is to say, the tendency of method is to prestructure the individual's way of seeing and leads to a situation where the inquirer controls and manipulates the

the text. (Here, we might well consider a basic principle from the 'new physics': the scale creates the phenomenon.) In contrast, the dialogical situation of hermeneutics strives to create a situation in which the interpreter both questions and is questioned by the text. One attempts to see the text under study as 'spoken language' and to develop a discussion with it.

What is involved here is the refusal to see the past as 'finished' or 'surpassed' by our advancing theories and the insistence that historical understanding is not found in the process of subjectivity purged of all biases (in other words, purged of our own historicity). Rather, understanding is found in opening ourselves and our biases to the truth claims of the text. This makes the task of determining what "the text actually states", to use MacEoin's phrase, superseded by the goals of a total hermeneutics.

This is not to say that the efforts by science-dominated scholars in the Geisteswissenschaften are without positive issue. Sociologists, historians, anthropologists and psychologists who strive to purge themselves from their studies in order to obtain 'objective' results no doubt contribute to the development of their respective disciplines as well as providing the essential information-base on which hermeneutical activity must rest. In studying religion, we cannot deny that every religious fact is always a historical, social and psychological phenomenon and is thereby existentially conditioned by the web of interacting forces within which it is situated. This multiple conditioning by empirically demonstrable facts, does not mean, however, that once these facts are set before us we have satisfactorily explained the religious phenomenon be it sacred text or the beliefs and behaviour of believers. We cannot fully explain, e.g., the Bab's or Baha'u'llah's writings by elucidating the Islamic background relevant to the text in question, by analysis of the author's class-background and life-history, by bringing out the circumstances surrounding the creation of the text (who received it and what questions were being addressed), important though all such endeavors are. Beyond this, there must be a more sophisticated application of hermeneutical insight which attempts to understand the truth claims of the given text as mediated through

tradition towards us and our prejudices.

MacEoin stresses the need for setting the goal of adoption of a method which is, among other criteria, as "free from subjective bias as possible". This prevalent attitude in the human studies appears to be a most influential heritage of the Cartesian and Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous subject who strives to renounce all prejudices which inhibit understanding. Such methodological alienation is criticised by Gadamer for not recognizing the essential and positive role of prejudices in all understanding. He recalls how 'prejudice' prior to the Enlightenment is not merely a negative factor, but is also based on a positive value judgement which then has "an adverse effect" or "disadvantage" towards its recipient in law. With the Enlightenment and its critique of religion and authority, prejudice comes to mean almost exclusively "unfounded judgement" (see, Truth and Method, pp. 240ff). In contrast to the slavish effort to renounce one's biases, Gadamer upholds that we must recognize that "the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world" (Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 9).

The hermeneutical task, then, is to place our prejudices in the open before the truth claim of a text. Heidegger points to this in Being and Time when he argues that the hermeneutic circle of interpretation consists in "working out" our fore-conceptions "in terms of the things themselves" (p. 153). In interpretation it is necessary to keep the text ever before one's gaze. This is not as simple as it may sound, for we are constantly 'distracted' in interpretation by our personal views which we impose on the text. Consequently, a person trying to understand a text is simply unable to subjugate his or her biases. To interpret is to project a meaning for the whole text as soon as some initial meanings emerge. And these initial meanings only emerge because one "is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what

emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there" (Truth and Method, p. 236). The type of historical inquiry which exalts the researcher's ability to bracket his or her personal horizon by an effective historical method may also be regarded in terms of spoken language and dialogue. But in this case the dialogue is more akin to a doctor ~~asking of~~ her patient's health or my attempt to simply acquaint myself with the views of a political candidate introduced to me at a local town meeting. Certainly information is being passed and received, but no depth understanding comes of such talk.

An important revelation of Gadamer's studies on the 'event of interpretation' is that it is impossible to recover the mens auctoris, the author's actual intentional meaning. Unfortunately, this is often what historians seek when they place themselves before a religious text. In his study of Babism and Baha'ism, MacEoin seems to be particularly ~~concerned~~ with uncovering what the Bab or Baha'u'llah 'really taught' in contrast to the subsequent distortions advanced by Baha'is. I have no doubts that there has been more than a little bit of willful tampering and distortion on the part of 'pious' Baha'is in their attempt to make the past conform to their present beliefs. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice's recent insistence on purging the translation of the memoirs of Ustad Muhammad ^cAli-yi Salmani of a number of passages shows us that the goal of making Babi and Baha'i history fit neatly with orthodoxy is very much alive today. And in matters such as this it is extremely valuable for historians, be they Baha'i or not, to bring such acts into the light and to set the record straight. However, I believe MacEoin has overstepped the mark when he tries to demonstrate that the Baha'i faith is essentially authoritarian, or that Baha'u'llah did not, in fact, teach sexual equality, etc. by marching out a highly selective number of quotations. Here, he seems to hold the belief that the interpretation which recovers and reveals the author's true meaning is the correct one whereas all others are necessarily incorrect. This way of looking at texts is like regarding interpretation as being similar to working out a math problem

which has but one answer. From this perspective, the author's original intention, in our case, say, Baha'u'llah's, constitutes a solid fact, a meaning-in-itself, which all unbiased and detached persons will be able to reproduce. If one adopts this stance, then, yes, they might be led to say, e.g., that 'Abdu'l-Baha either misunderstood the Kitab al-Aqdas or was simply a genial but manipulative religious salesman playing the Western market when he advocated a much more feminist platform for Baha'ism and espoused more liberal measures for the treatment of criminals, to name but two obvious points of difference.

I would argue that a more realistic view is to see things more fluidly than either MacEoin or the defenders of Baha'i orthodoxy, who both seem keen to establish a correct version of Babism and Baha'ism. The point to be emphasized here is that reflection on the hermeneutical event shows us that a definitive or canonical interpretation of a text is an illusory goal. Every text, and particularly scripture, always goes beyond the author's explicit and implicit intentions. Every age, according to Gadamer, must understand a transmitted text in its own way,

for the text is part of the whole tradition in which the age takes an...interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence the by the totality of the objective course of history....Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive, but always a productive attitude as well....It is enough to say the we understand in a different way, if we understand at all (Truth and Method, pp263-264).

It is not only that there is divergence on 'significance' of what an established text says, but rather that when persons bring themselves before a text they actually see it differently.

The hermeneutically trained mind does not focus its gaze on the ephemeral mens auctoris, but looks instead with the author at what is being communicated. Here there is true

dialogue as the interpreter opens up to the text and lets it assert its own viewpoint. This is seen as the most effective means of revealing one's own fore-concepts or biases and thereby taking them into consideration when seeking to understand a text. Hence there is recognition that the fore-concepts and prejudices in the mind of the interpreter are not merely standing still and susceptible to subjugation by an act of will. We are not able to know in advance which of our prejudices are productive onesthat make understanding possible from those that hinder and lead to misunderstanding. This is an essential dimension of the 'working out of fore-concepts in terms of the things themselves' spoken of above. It is the encounter with the fundamental concern of the text that lays bare what the text is capable of revealing. Hermeneutics is therefore a way of bringing the text into the present, renewing it, and preserving it from the death which modern historians usually condemn it.

The general thrust of Gadamer's observations may lead one to think that this way of interpreting is arbitrary and thus only a lapse into relativism, or worse, plain distortion of the text. We should note, however, that in true hermeneutical work meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. We cannot hold blindly to our fore-concepts if we are truly attempting to understand the meaning of another, in the same way that we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word in a text without distorting the meaning of the whole. To reiterate, what is called for is our openness to the fundamental concern conveyed through the text, an openness which always includes situating the other's meaning in relation with the whole of our meanings. We have stressed throughout this paper that the hermeneutically trained scholar is prepared for the text to address him or her personally; they are sensitive to the texts quality of newness. This sensitivity, asserts Gadamer, "involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's bias, so that the text may...be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (Truth and Method, p. 238).

At this point, I feel the urge to anticipate the charge that I have introduced Aunt Sally to the discussion by painting a false picture of historical method. Indeed, I may have been somewhat unfair in the above by not pointing out that part of the inevitable tension between historians and phenomenologists arises because each camp is looking for different things when examining historical documents. Historians do the crucial task of deciphering historical documents just as much for what they 'betray' as for what they explicitly state. Historical method is an effective way to understand the changes and modifications that occur in human groups and it gives us insight of the 'stamp of identity' which any segment of social history bears. Also, the phenomenologically oriented scholar must certainly admit that there are countless tasks of historical scholarship that have no relation to our present and to the depths of its historical consciousness. These countless tasks relate to what MacEoin, following Cantwell Smith, describes as the empirical facts of religion in contrast to faith related matters (op. cit., p. 71). Yet, I wonder if the dichotomy of empirical facts of religion open to scrutiny vis-a-vis faith related matters relegated to the sloppy domain of the "open question" is an adequate model. Phenomenology shows us that we are indeed able to examine how persons experience the world without reducing the objective data of consciousness to sense perception or, as Popper does, limit the field of meaningful human knowledge to that of rational understanding. Phenomenology seeks to register and utilize the intentionality of all acts of consciousness and supraconsciousness. The studies of Henry Corbin, for example, show how imagination, love, sympathy or any other sentiment induces knowledge of objects appropriate to the sentiment. Obviously these objects are not as manageable as your run of the mill empirical facts. However, homo religiosus consists of the total person and we cannot simply write off the invisible, sacred dimensions of human being as being beyond critical study. Phenomenology insists that scripture must not just be deciphered; it must also be approached as a cipher, revealing absolute values and truths of the human spirit in its sacred dimension.

The noncumulative truths so richly documented in religious literature are the ones that touch us as individuals in our deepest experiences of self. They are not susceptible to more definitive explanation by "our advancing scientific theories".³ They may, however, be experienced more deeply. As absolute values of the human spirit they are inexhaustable and will be taken up anew by each soul. The religious scholar must remain sensitive to the fact that scripture's mode of being keeps it open to the future via application in each new situation. (Here, it would be well to recall Parry's emphasis on religion as performance as it bears on the study of religious texts.) Scripture does not exist primarily for the sake of historians who do not feel addressed by the text, since it is merely another artifact of history to be manipulated for what it may reveal. No, scripture is first and foremost a call to the conscience of the individual with a goal to exercise its soteriological function. And this means that in our academic efforts to reach a comprehensive understanding of Babi and Baha'i scripture there must be greater use of phenomenological insight than has to date been observed.

Creative hermeneutics leads naturally to the explanation of the sacred text towards its farthest limits: to the unveiling of new meanings and cultural values which spring forth from the text as latent expressions of the "center" which every religion has. In this regard, I believe that MacEoin has failed to adequately correlate his personal views to the "center" of Baha'ism, which is undoubtedly belief in the oneness of God and

humanity and not a rigid scriptural authoritarianism which his highly selective quotations would seem to indicate. For example, in his response to Momen, MacEoin quotes Baha'u'llah on conforming one's words to the most literal sense of the Word of God. Why does this particular passage carry greater weight than the much more numerous references by Baha'u'llah to the need for the individual to penetrate both the outer (zāhir) and inner (bātin) dimensions of the Word of God and to live according to the insights found in this illuminative process?

Similarly, his quotations from ^cAbdu'l-Baha on the need for Bahais to turn to the Center of the Covenant rather than voicing personal interpretations is a moot point since the Baha'i faith no longer has an "authoritative interpreter" to turn to. I would think that the well known encouragement of ^cAbdu'l-Baha that in Baha'i discussions the spark of truth is best seen through the clash of differing opinions is more faithful to the essence of Baha'i belief and practice.

These reflections have run a course some distance away from their source: MacEoin's observations on problems of scholarship in a Baha'i context. They were triggered by MacEoin's insistence on the supreme efficacy of the methodology he has adopted for deciphering the true nature of Babism and Baha'ism and I have attempted to point out some of the limits of this method. At times MacEoin actually sounds more orthodox than the orthodox Baha'is he condemns. Or should I say that both sides seem to have a strange fixation on holding fast to the book in ways that are ultimately unsatisfactory. On the one hand, we have MacEoin trying to reach back to what the Bab or Baha'u'llah 'really taught'-as opposed to later Baha'i rearrangements and distortions of doctrine and history. On the other, we have **fundamentalist Baha'is** clinging to the 'authoritative' interpretations of Shoghi Effendi as the final word as to what true Shaykhism or Babism was and what Baha'ism is and will be. Both approaches, it seems to me, fail to take us too far in grasping the complex phenomena of the Babi and Baha'i religions.

I therefore trust that it is obvious that the distinctions I have drawn between a science based historical method and hermeneutic phenomenology is something different from the dichotomy of scholarship produced by Baha'is vs. their nonbelieving colleagues. I am sure that many Baha'is in high administrative places will feel uncomfortable with the insights that are bound to emerge as believing and nonbelieving scholars apply the phenomenological touch to Babi and Baha'i scripture, since these interpretations will, no doubt, differ from those of Shoghi Effendi and the vision of the Baha'i faith which the Universal House of Justice seems determined to maintain. As I have emphasized above, to understand is to understand differently.

Finally, I do not wish to make the gulf between historians and phenomenologists sound unbridgable. I share the hope of Raffaele Pettazzoni that the two disciplines will compliment each other and broaden their respective horizons (see "The Supreme Being: Phenomenological Structure and Historical Development", in History of Religion, ed. Eliade and Kitagawa, p. 66). Hopefully, in the not too distant future we will see a greater diversity of approaches being utilized in Babi and Baha'i studies by all interested parties, complimenting and enriching our understanding of this significant expression of the human spirit.

FOOTNOTES

¹This is a revised version of a presentation at the Bābī-Bahā'ī Studies Seminar, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 10-11 September 1983. Hence the spoken style. The few comments added in the following footnotes were sparked by the discussion of the paper by the seminar participants--D MacEoin, S Lambden, M Momen and P Smith--and with R Parry.

²This sentence now appears troublesome to me, and here I would like to argue from both sides of the fence: for and against the reduction. When I wrote this section, I had in mind the great diversity found among phenomenologists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, e.g., notes that phenomenology can be regarded as a style of thinking and not just a method developed by Husserl. Also, the case of Heidegger is instructive, since he abandoned the epoché in his own hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger's position stems from the nature of the phenomenon he studied: Being. Since the reduction consists of suspending, at least temporarily, the question of whether the phenomenon has being, Heidegger queried, how can such a method help in explaining the nature of Being? Thus my point that to be phenomenologically oriented, generally speaking, one need not utilize the reduction. On the other hand, it is questionable to equate the phenomenological reduction to methodological agnosticism as the latter term is usually understood, and Parry rightly notes the "misleading" use of "agnosticism" in terms of the phenomenological reduction (see Parry, "Phenomenology, Methodological Agnosticism and Apologetics", p 16). Still, I wonder whether the epoché--as distinct from methodological agnosticism--is, in fact, inadequate as a method for a Baha'i to adopt (see Parry's conclusion to this end, *ibid.*, pp 17-19). As I understand the epoché, it is not an end but an initial approach to the religious phenomenon. Spiegelberg, e.g., speaks of five stages in phenomenology: 1) an intuitive grasp of a phenomenon through the epoché, i.e. pure description; 2) the determination of its essence, its essential characteristics and relations (essential phenomenology; 3) the study of its ways of appearance in consciousness (phenomenology of appearances); 4) the study of the constitution of the phenomenon in consciousness (constitutive

phenomenology); and 5) the hermeneutic interpretation of its meaning (hermeneutic phenomenology) (Herbert Spiegelberg, "Movements in Philosophy: Phenomenology and its Parallels" Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 44 (1983), pp 284-85). Henry Corbin, e.g., is probably the last person one would accuse of adopting methodological agnosticism in his studies of Shi'ism, Sufism and Western mystics. Yet Corbin, as a phenomenologist, strove for the "intuitive perception of essences (wesenschau)". As he himself observes, "the term [wesenschau] belongs to the vocabulary of... strict observation phenomenology of Husserl rather than the existential phenomenology of Heidegger" (Henry Corbin, "The Question of Comparative Philosophy" Spring (1980), p 2). Now, Corbin surely broke out into a non-Husserlian way of phenomenology, but he found the epoché a useful tool for reaching-back-to the religious facts, and I see no compelling reason why a Baha'i should be apprehensive concerning use of the reduction. I shall explore this path further in a forthcoming study, "Symbol and Metahistory in the Writings of Baha'u'llah".

³Here, it is important to emphasize another distinction between cumulative and noncumulative truths. A problem often found in this area is the conflating of the terms 'objective' and 'absolute' when discussing 'truth'. By this persons usually mean that in the world there are objects which cannot be known in every aspect of their being, yet they exist and therefore they must be accepted as having a real or objective or absolute nature which we attempt to describe scientifically. An obviously praiseworthy goal for science. But if religion is the object of study, the phenomena under scrutiny can be of a completely different order than empirical facts. Such religious phenomena exist in a vertical dimension which leads us beyond thinking dominated by recourse to sense data. Thus I prefer to speak of the absolute truths of the vertical, trans-rational dimension of human experience and of objective truth when dealing with empirical facts. To take the obvious example, God, then, is not an objective truth, but an absolute truth whose existence in the world is only a possibility waiting for persons capable of creating the Transcendent Being as a truth-quality of their own being-in-the-world. Consequently,

there is more than a little truth to the old accusation that we humans have created God in our own image. I would rather say that persons create God(s) in the Images of their soul. This creative activity is a primordial intuition, an unfolding and unveiling of Deus absconditus, whose unknowable Essence hides from human thought in the very act of revelation through the symbols, or Images, of consciousness (cf. Henry Corbin, Face de Dieu, Face de l'Homme, Paris: Flammarion, 1983, pp 237-310 and Martin Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics, New York: Anchor Books, 1961, ch 4). Contrary to the doctrine that God is a Supreme Being (ens supremum)-- a fatal flaw in most of Jewish and Christian thinking for it makes God merely the greatest being (ens) in the horizontal order of existents--we need to recognize that God is solely Being (Esse); that there is an ontological break between Being and beings. Through our passion for Being, we plunge into the symbols of religious consciousness which simultaneously reveal and hide God. The symbols of religious and philosophic expression may then act as signs pointing beyond, or over the threshold, from the horizontal order to the vertical.

⁴See Parry's discussion of 'Concept and Experience' in "Rational/Conceptual/Performance--The Baha'i Faith and Scholarship-- A discussion paper", BSB, vol 1, no 4 (March 1983), pp 18-20. In this paper, Parry discusses the limits of representation in language of the intentional significance of religion, because "religion (as the deepest example of the concept/experience dichotomy) is grounded in this experiential and non conceptual dimension [i.e. spiritual and moral transformation of believers] ; religion requires enactment rather than varying degrees of analysis...I am certainly not denying the need for conceptual analysis, but we need to be aware of its irreducible limits with respect to a phenomenon that is primarily experiential" (ibid., p 19).