

## **Doing Scholarship from a Faith Perspective: Reading the Sacred as Sacred Encounter**

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When Moses, walking through the desert, came upon Mount Horeb, he beheld God speaking from within a flame of fire amidst a burning bush, ablaze, yet unconsumed, and calling out to him:

“Moses! Moses!”

To which he unhesitatingly replied:

“Here am I.”

Whereupon he was commanded,

“Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place wherein thou standest is holy ground.”<sup>1</sup>

Today no man can claim to have seen the burning bush; but the voice of the Transcendent calls still in accents of absolute authority in the Holy Writ of the religions of the world. A reader who would venture to such formidable and self-sufficient mountains, whereon millions hear, even today, the voice of God or truth supreme, and seek with reason and study to gain a glimmer of that spot wherein Moses stood, such a one, believer or not, would do well, like Moses, to halt for thought, and first put off his sandals in respect, else reverence, for the sheer magnitude of his purposed subject.

For in approaching scripture, it will be readily acknowledged, one is dealing with a text extraordinary in the most palpable way. No other text outside of scripture carries so profoundly in every word a million and a million life-trajectories; no other category of text has so deeply shaped or shapes today so many identities in such far-reaching ways. To say “this word means this” of a part of sacred scripture is, wittingly or unwittingly, to pronounce on the meaning of unnumbered lives whose hopes and yearnings are, were or will be built around a given understanding of the very words one is pronouncing on - peripheral or irrelevant though they might seem to the commentator. When encountering scripture then, even outwith a religious commitment, a text is never just a text, and context means much more than *sitz im leben*, the “setting in life” or circumstances of revelation.<sup>2</sup> The same is true about sacred history, itself mediated largely through the written word in the form of diverse documentation.

If such reflections might give pause to any thoughtful reader, doubly may it be so for a believer in the spiritual authority of a religion’s holy writings. For such a reader, if he be fully alive to the experience of faith, reverence might well dictate a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 3:1-5

<sup>2</sup> The term originates with the founder of biblical form criticism, Hermann Gunkel, and has since become a fundamental tool in scriptural study. Cf. R.E. Clements, *A Century of Old Testament Study* (2nd ed.; Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1983), and G. M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, chapters 4-6.

trepidation before the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>3</sup> which absolute transcendence must evoke in a self-aware mind, as with the pragmatic tools of analysis he seeks to understand, and then articulate, the nature or meaning of a text that claims to be divine in origin, ineffable in meaning, infinite in depth, and all-encompassing in scope.

In the face of such considerations as apply either to a careful, or to a reverential reader, it is not my goal in the ensuing essays to arrive at a set of clearly laid rules or hermeneutic formulas. Such a venture would seem chimerical before the complexity of textuality itself, a field which in the twentieth century in particular may be said to have exploded under the impact of a myriad lines of approach in history, hermeneutics, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics and literary criticism, to name but a few prominent lenses. And if this be the case for texts devoid of claims to transcendent or ineffable meaning, how much more elusive will be the aim of codifying the interpretation of texts as multilayered and complex as a religion's sacred corpus.

Rather, the efforts garnered here represent an attempt at pausing for thought - at taking in, rather than taking for granted, the immensity of the act of reading, beyond linguistic or grammatical considerations, the meaning of texts, sacred and historical, that shape the daily lives of millions. It is also an experiment, to discover in practice the implications of studying sacred scripture and its consequences under the three guiding orientations of academic rigour, personal faith, and universality, born of a keen consciousness of one's humanity, its frailty, its connectedness, its catastrophes, its possibilities, in the context of the overarching adaptive challenge of globalization. These are not the only orientations one may take before the subject, nor might they yet be the best ones, but they transparently represent the author's actual starting point, dictate his hermeneutical intent or thrust, and shape his manner of expression.

### **The problem with faith perspectives**

At the outset, then, is a frank acknowledgement of what may be designated a "faith perspective", that is, the author's intellectual recognition and even more, existential commitment, to the claims put forward by the texts and figures he intends to study, as far as he may understand those claims. This is not without its complications. It is today, less so perhaps than in decades past, a delicate thing for a writer to acknowledge in print one's religious commitments, nor indeed is it always relevant or necessary. Academic writing, and even more academic methodologies, have been for the most part decidedly agnostic in their tenor, with the unique exception of theology, consisting mainly of believers speaking to believers about the substance of belief (a branch of study that, whilst drawing on other fields in its endeavours, is but seldom turned to by other academic disciplines for substantive contributions).

The reason for this methodological agnosticism and for the comparative discursive isolation of theologians is not difficult to deduce, and is nicely expressed by the editors of the ambitious *Syntopicon* of the University of Chicago's *Great Books of the Western World* project:

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1950 [*Das Heilige*, 1917], pp.12-13

“Argument is unprofitable – worse than that, unintelligible – when opponents do not share a common ground... Lack of a common measure for judging opposing views tends to render them uncommunicable to one another. For men to be in this plight is the exception in science and philosophy, but it seems to be the typical situation where the basic issues of religion are concerned. Of all subjects the most controversial, religious issues seem to be the least capable of being settled by controversy... Faith and lack of faith, or the diversity of faiths, seem to render certain questions as imponderable as they are weighty.”<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind modern academia, by making methodology religiously agnostic, has sought to establish universally comprehensible criteria that might facilitate the objective study of reality, unimpeded by the intensely subjective incommunicability of personal faith. Hence, while a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and an Atheist would be unlikely to accept equally the procedural premises of Christian theology, taking as its starting point the salvific intervention of God in history and the advent of Jesus Christ as the acme and axis of that intervention, they very likely would find themselves in agreement when it comes to the premises of mathematical logic if they be mathematicians, experimental method if they be scientists, or grammar if linguists. If a given premise was questioned by one party in this second scenario, it would be most likely on the basis of other, fully shared premises – the ability to meaningfully debate and disagree about one premise would itself be an indication of sufficient common ground in which to do so. On the other hand, a predicate following directly from the premise of the existence of God would be *a priori* inadmissible to an atheist, just as a predicate resting solely on the assumption that Jesus was the Messiah awaited by the tribes of Israel, could not be entertained by a Jew who considers that same Messiah is yet to come.

But if one can argue that contemporary academic methods are, can or should be theologically neutral, equally available and applicable to the religiously committed as to the undecided, atheistic or agnostic scholar, it is now largely acknowledged that no academic writing is in fact ideologically neutral or value free. The degree to which values impinge on the scholarly process varies in relation to the matter of study, perhaps influencing least mathematical investigations;<sup>5</sup> perhaps affecting most the analysis of religion from whatever angle one might interrogate it, historical, philosophical, ethical, anthropological, phenomenological, sociological or historical.

From this perspective, it may be suggested that, when it comes to religion, regardless of the methodology applied, a writer’s stance is never neutral, though in his use of language, by avoiding explicit theological or value judgements he might achieve a degree of rhetorical neutrality. But the fact remains that religions call for and imply a degree of existential assent to their truth-claims, which one can accept or deny with greater or lesser degrees of conviction, but before which one cannot achieve a neutral

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<sup>4</sup> “Religion”, in *The Great Ideas, A Syntopicon of the Great Books of the Western World*, M.J Adler (editor in chief), Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, 1987, p.418

<sup>5</sup> Although even in this apparently value-neutral field we find that cultural and even religious values do indeed impinge on and are implicit in mathematical conceptions, as cogently argued by Alan J. Bishop in “Western mathematics: the secret weapon of cultural imperialism”, in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffin & H. Tiffin (Eds). *The post-colonial studies reader*, Routledge, London, 1995, and by Boris Handal in “Philosophies and pedagogies of mathematics”, *Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal*, 2003,. Available at:

<http://www.ex.ac.uk/~PErnest/pome17/pdf/handal.pdf>

stance which neither accepts nor rejects such claims, existing in some kind of *epoché*<sup>6</sup>: such *epoché*, or suspension of assent, would in itself imply a position at odds with the epistemic authority which religions arrogate to themselves on the basis of claims to transcendent truth.

It is true that the scholar's stance in relation to a religion, which might range from ardent faith to hostile disbelief, taking in indifference, sympathy, contempt, qualified acceptance or rejection, scepticism, trust, puzzlement, mystification, adoration or confusion, in short, the variegated range of nuances of which the human heart is capable, will not always be evident or relevant. Thus a mathematical discussion will in all likelihood bypass the issue of religious commitment, and in the area of religion, descriptive narratives of religious ritual or surveys of believers' stated opinions, or recapitulations of universally accepted or entirely uncontroversial issues, will make one's religious stance more or less irrelevant. However, when it comes to interpreting implicitly or explicitly the meaning of a religion, be it in terms of its scriptures, its teachings, its history, or the religious experience of its followers, there can be no claim to epistemic neutrality – one's degree and manner of assent to a religion's truth-claims will, a priori, open or close a range of interpretive and narrative possibilities.

If neither broad position then, religiously committed or religiously uncommitted, is in fact neutral when it comes to the study of religion itself or a religion in particular, the question arises whether, in those areas where such commitments become relevant, either lens is to be preferred as a way of understanding religious content, history and meaning. From the nineteenth century on, academia - barring theologians - has tended to answer in the affirmative, that one lens is to be preferred over the other, namely the religiously uncommitted lens. This is on account of the distinctive bias that a faith perspective can introduce into scholarship, as opposed to the objectivity which a secular or religiously uncommitted approach might hope to achieve. A religious scholar, it is clear, particularly when studying his or her own faith tradition, will be prompted or required to reach or uphold, or at the very least exclude certain conclusions if and inasmuch as they pertain to the very substance of his or her belief, whereas if he is not thus constrained by faith, he will or at least can be guided by universally valid criteria.

This view is neatly captured in Werblowski's dictum that the true scholar "eliminates his religion from his studies, whatever the 'religious' character of the motives and drives that make him study religion at all."<sup>7</sup> In this light, religious faith in one's object of study may be considered a potential hindrance to objective judgement, while a mind and heart unattached thereto may be regarded as objectivity's friend.

Likewise for Kurt Rudolph, as for many others, a scholar's faith "must not be made a condition or presupposition of scientific research. Religions are *historical* entities, and hence objects for historical research; this, however, is independent of religious faith and in no way bound to it... Whether there has been an adequate scientific recognition or misinterpretation of a religio-historical phenomenon cannot be scientifically established

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<sup>6</sup> On the provenance and nature of the concept of *epoché*, see Pierre Couissin, "The Stoicism of the New Academy"; *The Sceptical Tradition*, pp.31-64; M. Burnyeat (ed.); University of California Press, 1983 p.33-41. The word has acquired modern resonance in the writings of Husserl, Derrida, and Ricoeur, among others.

<sup>7</sup> R.J.Z. Werblowski, "The Comparative Study of Religions – A Review Essay", p.3, in *Judaism* 8/4 (1959), p.1-9

by faith and subjective emotions, but only by means of a scientific judgement oriented toward objective reality.”<sup>8</sup> In both the above quotes, representative of wider and probably still dominant currents, objectivity in the study of religion is aligned to methodological agnosticism and disciplinary secularism. By contrast a starting point of religious belief, at least as far as academic methodology is concerned even if not personal conviction, is consequently considered as inherently less objective. Implicit in such a view is a high degree of confidence in one’s ability to write objectively when using the technical apparatus of modern scientific methodologies, if uncontaminated by the subjective influence of religious faith.

### **Faith perspective vs. objectivity: rethinking the dichotomy**

That the quest for objectivity in scholarly endeavours is a most worthy aspiration, it is well to maintain and uphold, yet it is also to be accepted that it is a most subtle and elusive one. In recent decades, it has become largely apparent that such self-confidence as Rudolph or Werblowski’s words aver, whether as regards the capacity of our scientific methodologies to exclude or neutralise our excessive subjectivity, or our own self-disciplined ability to do so, was perhaps premature. The challenge is particularly acute, as it is now clear, when it comes to interpreting each other’s values and existential beliefs. As Weber pointed out already some one hundred years ago, we can, wittingly or unawares, "succumb readily to a special kind of illusion, namely that we are able to refrain entirely from making conscious value judgements of our own."<sup>9</sup>

In fact, notwithstanding Rudolph’s categorical statements, the “myth of objectivity” in scholarly endeavours has lost a great deal of ontological authority, becoming rather a heuristic tool, an aspirational principle that seems today closer to the ethical notion of “fair judgement” than the philosophical claim to a detached and value-free observation of an outside object. Rudolph’s conceptualisation of objectivity is based on an epistemological paradigm derived in no small measure from, or at least cognate with, a Newtonian paradigm in the physical sciences that has since been punctured by relativity theory when it comes to the universe’ immensities, and quantum theory when it comes to existence’ minims - while even the seemingly irreducible objectivity of mathematics has been nuanced by Godel’s Incompleteness Theorem. The philosophical work of the likes of Kuhn, Feyerabend and Popper, to name only some of the protagonists in the recent philosophy of science, has further significantly qualified such high expectations of objectivity in scientific methodologies and indeed epistemology itself in the physical sciences (without removing its centrality as an aspirational principle) - how much more in the human sciences where the complexity and range of variables is so much more nebulous and subject to interpretation.

Indeed, it has come to be widely recognised that the narratives we weave, our analytical standpoint, our distinctive selection of “facts” out of the great mass of undigested “data”, upon which we build our analyses, our interpretation thereof and our final conclusions, no less than our initial theories, intuitions, research goals and the very tone and manner in which we engage with our subject of study and our intended audience, all reflect to a greater or lesser degree the ineradicable biases, the foundational

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<sup>8</sup> K. Rudolph, *Die Religionsgeschichte an der Leipziger Universität*, p. 118, translated by E.D. Sharpe in *Comparative Religion – A History*, p.281

<sup>9</sup> Weber: *Political Writings*, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," p. 19.

presuppositions and overarching orientation of our values, our established worldview and our own 'hermeneutic circle' above and beyond any aspiration to objectivity we might harbour in our enterprise.<sup>10</sup> As Weber also argued somewhat before his time, "there is no 'objective' scientific analysis of culture ... or 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints -- expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously -- they are selected, analyzed, and organized for expository purposes."<sup>11</sup> Not only that, but recent research suggests that it is impossible to separate our "affects" our emotional and affective state and condition, from our rational judgement.<sup>12</sup>

This makes objectivity, not a chimera, but an approximation, and our ineradicable subjectivity, a fact of life, which may be opaque if undisclosed and in tune with our audiences' conventions, or transparent if stated forthwith or else dissonant amidst our readers' own predispositions. If it is in fact, as it would seem, impossible, and were it possible, probably unhealthy, to fully disengage our values, our belief systems, our culture, our experience, from our explorations of reality, and most particularly of social reality (not to speak of spiritual reality for such as acknowledge its existence), then the ever elusive goal of objectivity may perhaps not be best served by a systematic effort at 'bracketing out' our subjectivity from our study and our writing, or at 'leaving our faith outside the door' when embarking on research into religion. Such bracketing out of our subjectivity, because ultimately incomplete, risks becoming disingenuous: a rhetorical rather than an epistemic feat masking the inevitable "remnant" of our personal values and affects, till that remnant becomes, though present, more or less invisible to the reader, and the scholar's bias henceforth not always less, but always less detectable.

In other words, the aspiration to objectivity would seem today to require, not so much the more or less impossible exclusion of our personal values and beliefs from our inquiry, as the being clear, and making clear, how they influence our exploration. For, while the pursuit of objectivity can act as a safeguard against prejudice, a basis for wider communication - for intersubjectivity - and a source of methodological humility, requiring that one question not merely one's subject of study but one's own starting point according to transparent and intercommunicable criteria and methodologies, the claim to an objective stance, judgement or conclusion can also serve as a conscious or unconscious foil for imposing one's own subjective and cultural values as objective norms, implying, at the least, a want of self-awareness, and at worse a form of methodological arrogance, leading to the subtle negation, denigration or suppression of difference in the name of higher truth.

This of course is not a novel insight, and the latent critique of disciplinary paradigms that it contains has been one of the running themes of twentieth century intellectual history across all branches of knowledge, giving rise to such diverse concepts and fields as Kuhn's paradigm theory<sup>13</sup> and the more radical social constructivist critique of

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<sup>10</sup> The term was coined by Schleiermacher in the following terms "The vocabulary and the history of an author's age together form a whole from which his writings must be understood as a part, and vice versa. Complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle, that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa." (Schleiermacher, in Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutics Reader*, pp. 84-85, Continuum, New York, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Luc Ciampi, "Reflections on the Role of Emotions in Consciousness and Subjectivity from the Perspective of Affect Logic", *Consciousness and Emotion* 4:2 (2003), pp.181-196

<sup>13</sup> G. Gutting, *Paradigms and Revolutions*, Notre Dame, Ind., 1980; T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962.

science,<sup>14</sup> Said's analysis of Orientalism,<sup>15</sup> Foucault's archeologies of discourse and exclusion,<sup>16</sup> Derrida's deconstruction,<sup>17</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith's criteria of believer-intelligibility,<sup>18</sup> the anthropological debates on the emic/etic relationship,<sup>19</sup> the fields of post-colonial and subaltern studies in literary and political analysis,<sup>20</sup> feminist hermeneutics,<sup>21</sup> empowerment and participatory discourses in social policy and research,<sup>22</sup> Habermas and Adorno's critique of positivism,<sup>23</sup> and many, many others. Such wide-ranging and unavoidable intellectual currents represent efforts, not always interrelated or even congenial, that nevertheless converge in exposing the presence of hidden norms and values inscribed in dominant discourses (frequently under the guise of objectivity), and on the other re-examine and revalue what Foucault described as "subjugated knowledge", "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down in the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."<sup>24</sup> Faith perspectives in scholarship, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, may be argued to constitute one example of precisely such "subjugated knowledges", dismissed by voices such as Rudolph and Werblowski's as "beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."

Common to such disparate yet paradigmatically influential concepts is the consciousness that, when it comes to the study of human beings the scholar or writer cannot claim to be free of subjective or cultural bias arising from his or her own upbringing and social reality; that such bias has frequently passed as objective knowledge or perspective merely because it was culturally shared or dominant, that is to say, hegemonic, and as such suppressed alternative worldviews and voices in which a wealth of insight was latent; and that there is both equity and methodological grounds for making one's subjectivity transparent and for allowing the objects of our research to speak in their own terms.

The natural conclusion one may draw upon further reflection, is that objectivity should be pursued, not by the suppression of subjectivity, whether our own or that of our "research subjects", but by its systematic engagement in a transparent and dialogic manner, that avoids discursive power struggles and finds increasingly nuanced and rigorous ways of harnessing the potential insights intrinsic in diversity. Objectivity

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<sup>14</sup> For a good and succinct critical review of social constructivism and science see Grover J. Whitehurst & Deanne A. Crone, "Social Constructivism, Positivism, and Facilitated Communication", *The Journal of the Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 1994, 19, 191-195.

<sup>15</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge, London, 1978

<sup>16</sup> See G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, Minneapolis, 1988

<sup>17</sup> See, C. Norris, *Derrida*, London, 1987

<sup>18</sup> See W.C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?" in M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (eds.) *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1959. See also W.C. Smith "Traditional Religions and Modern Culture", in *Proceedings of the Xith International Congress of the IAHR*, I, pp. 55ff., Leiden, 1968

<sup>19</sup> Cf. T.N. Headland, K.L. Pike, and M. Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, Sage Publications, Inc., 1990

<sup>20</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, "General Introduction" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London (1995), p.1-4

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Arnstein S.R., "A Ladder of Participation", *American Institute of Planners Journal*, 35 (4), pp.216-224, 1969

<sup>23</sup> Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, tr. London, 1976

<sup>24</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon, New York, 1980, p.82.

becomes here a process of transparent engagement on the part of the scholar, one's faith position or lack of it being neither a help nor a hindrance to objectivity, but rather an inevitable starting point. One is objective not to the degree to which one is free from subjective preconceptions, but to the extent that one is reflexive, transparent, and humble about them, whereas one breaks objectivity's canons, not when one acknowledges or even embraces one's subjective predispositions and constraints, but when one becomes opaque, dogmatic or intolerant about them – whether one is a believer, an agnostic or a convinced atheist.

Eric D. Sharpe's address to the International Association for the History of Religions becomes immediately relevant:

“Clavier has recently called for competence, sincerity and impartiality as the three conditions on which the study of religion can proceed. I think he is right, though I would perhaps go further, and say that a scholar may express any opinion, provided that he always nails his colours to the mast and makes it quite clear on what criteria he is passing judgement.”<sup>25</sup>

Such perspectives displace the hegemony of secularism, without replacing it with a hegemony of faith. By pointing out the limitations of any personal perspective, secular or religious, agnostic or committed, and setting it alongside others in a dialogic frame, it shifts dialogue from the dynamic of competition, typified by mutual dismissals, by mutual isolation, by mutual conviction in the superiority of one's scholarly paradigm, to a dynamic of engaged diversity, with all its inherent and irreducible tensions, its risks of facile solutions, the temptations of avoidance and, above all, the opportunities for innovation, for reformulation, for synthesis, stimulus and creativity.

Already in 1959 Wifred Cantwell Smith adverted to a process of profound and growing significance for the study of religion, a process still gathering momentum and as yet not normative:

“In our day a new development in these studies is to be discerned, inaugurating a second major stage, of rather different type... In the first phase there was amassed an imposing knowledge about other people's religions. In the second phase it is those other people themselves that are present...

“...Formerly the scholar was seen, ideally, as the detached academic intellect, surveying its material impersonally, almost majestically, and reporting on it objectively. Such a concept is characteristic of the academic tradition of Western Europe... along with the academic tradition of detached secular study of religion, there is growing in both Christendom and elsewhere a religiously related scholarship of religious diversity.

“...[An] aspect of this development is that even the secular rationalist is coming to be seen as a person like another: not a god, not a superior impersonal intellect, monarch of all it surveys, but a man with a particular point of view. ...the secular intellectual, like the religious believer, takes his place as a member of one group of men, one of the world's communities, looking out upon the others.

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<sup>25</sup>E.J. Sharpe in *Comparative Religion – A History*, p.292



“Each writer in this field is beginning to be recognized, and to recognize himself, as the exponent or champion of one tradition in a world of other persons expounding or championing others... one cannot study religion from above, only from alongside or from within – only as a member of some group.”<sup>26</sup>

As we transcend in growing numbers (the trend seems unlikely to diminish) the more or less dogmatic standpoint that only a secular perspective is a warrant of objectivity, or that one’s readings of scripture are objective in exact proportion to one’s lack of existential commitment to the texts one is perusing, we find the interpretive landscape, not impoverished, but richer, for new elements of diversity come into play. Religions are not purely historical entities as per Rudolph’s characterization: they are also lived experiences. Insofar as this is so, the meaning of scripture is to include, but must go beyond, historico-critical considerations. If what scripture meant one hundred, or one thousand years ago to its believers is different to what it might mean today, this does not of necessity imply that an earlier, or later relationship to scripture harbours the correct or true meaning, but rather that scripture has greater reserves of meaning than one epoch or one reading might exhaust.

There is yet more; by opening scholarly discourse to faith perspectives, not as normative but neither as inferior, simply as one more lens through which to probe for insight into a religious phenomenon in non-hegemonic dialogue with other modes of discourse, scholarship on religion achieves a new degree of relevance, since religion, for the overwhelming majority of humanity, is experienced, in fact, as a religious phenomenon. To bracket out this experience from the practice, as opposed to the subject matter, of studies of religion, is to silence or marginalise the voice of the millions, even billions of people whose religious experience gives religious scripture and community its distinctive character. This may be legitimate as one approach that yields a certain range of insights, but seems inadequate as the sole academically valid perspective, limiting the “acceptable” academic study of religion to those who share one particular, secularised, hermeneutical ideology. To creatively engender spaces for academically rigorous, yet religiously informed perspectives, on the other hand, is to dramatically increase the capacity of our intellectual discourse on religion to not only describe, but engage the insight of the people whose experience makes religion a subject of study in the first place.

With this in mind, the present book constitutes a sincere if ever tentative exploration of Bahá’í sacred writings

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<sup>26</sup> W.C. Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?” in M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (eds.) *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1959.