
BOOK REVIEW

Gregg, Stephen E. and Lynne Scholefield. 2015. *Engaging with Lived Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Routledge. 180pp. ISBN: 9780415534475 £125.00 (hbk); ISBN: 9780415534482 £37.99 (pbk); ISBN: 9781315716671 £26.59 (e-book).

Reviewed by: Beth Singler, Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, St Edmunds College, University of Cambridge.
bv20@cam.ac.uk

Keywords: fieldwork; methodology; ethnography; pedagogy; digital fieldwork; ethics.

Ask any current PhD student, or perhaps even any “tenured” academic (the lucky ones who have managed, by hook or by crook, to wrangle a significant period away from the frontline to engage in research) about the issues and tribulations of fieldwork and you will likely get similar pained expressions and discussions of what they didn’t plan for, or did not expect. That Gregg and Scholefield have attempted to comprehensively address these issues, and for an undergraduate audience at that, is highly commendable. As a newly minted PhD graduate with direct experience of extended fieldwork (primarily digital fieldwork at that), I found a lot of material in this book not only valuable, but something that I would have benefited from at the beginning of that long research period.

The strongest element of the book is its own reliance on fieldwork. Employing the voices of those who have done fieldwork, both experts and the “neophyte researcher,” the book demonstrates the “lived fieldwork” experience with all its ups and downs, and impactful experiences. As one undergraduate is described as saying, “Fieldwork is amazing. It doesn’t just get you thinking but it touches your heart.” As in most (good) contemporary fieldwork there is also a strong thread of self-reflexivity in this text. The authors begin the book with a discussion of where they stand as researchers, including boxed direct quotes from both Gregg and Scholefield. There is also a situating of fieldwork and lived religion within the wider discussion of the complexities of what the authors type as “Reported” and “Represented” religion. Issues around the teaching of religion in universities are also explored, such as the difficulties inherent in the World Religion paradigm that has held sway for so long and is increasingly critiqued. Gregg and Scholefield give resources for investigating this discussion.

Likewise, in terms of structure and systems, their pedagogical methodology for the book is clear: each chapter takes on a different location of form of fieldwork, and each chapter ends with resources for the student, or for the teacher or guide for the neophyte researcher. There is also good discussion of the roots of the methods we can often take for granted, exploring some of the context to the functionalism of Malinowski or the sociology of Durkheim. In terms of locations the book is praiseworthy for thinking outside the “temple” model of fieldwork and for encouraging discussion of locations that are shaped

by their uses and users without being explicitly “religious.” This is implied by the title of “Lived Religion,” but the explication is valuable for the researcher needing theoretical support for their area of interest, an area that might not fit the models provided by a more traditional account of religion and where it is “done.”

Therefore, it was pleasing to see a chapter dedicated to “Virtual fieldwork: engaging with religions and new (and old) media,” which I am of course a little biased towards but which is perhaps under supported as a location for research by more traditional departments. But as digital ethnography emerges, and becomes increasingly relevant, paying attention to more than just the repeating discussions about ethics in digital research is key. Gregg and Scholefield discuss issues around the nature of religion online, the performativity of the internet, and the essentialism and nostalgia of views supporting “traditional religion” over newer forms emerging through “Web 2.0” (although a critique of this term and its baggage and specific uses might have been valuable to draw out continuities with other media).

Likewise, and again self-reflexively drawing on my own experience, it was commendable that a chapter was also given to the writing process, as fieldwork is a “writing culture” as in James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). However, as a prolific social media user as well as an ethnographer, I had to question the advice from the authors not to post on Facebook and Twitter about your research. Certainly, details of conversations with informants are strictly to be avoided, as well as anything that identifies them against their wishes. But disseminating research, even as it happens (and even as it goes wrong), can be extremely beneficial for both the writing process and the development of a public-facing academic profile. Nevertheless, engaging with this book clarified my thoughts on some aspects of fieldwork and will inform my work going forward, and it would be a valuable addition to the syllabus of undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists alike.