
BOOK REVIEW

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This volume offers a new take on a recurring set of problematics: how positionality affects research results. I use positionality here to indicate position vis-à-vis other things, not social context. Each of the twenty articles in this collection grapple with different problems of relationality in religious research. Perhaps the urge to deal with these problems is felt most acutely in the quandary of participant observation. Every fieldwork researcher faces the need to establish herself in the eyes of the group studied. And each informant exists in a web of relations. But problems of relationality exist beyond this situation, from issues of personal belief to institutional identity. The inside/outside dichotomy cannot reflect the full range of possibilities. Yet, as used in this volume, insider/outsider becomes a tool to conceptualize and think through key issues and complications in religious studies.

The editors first ground the discussion in comparative methodology. Traditional approaches to the study of religion, as outlined by Stephen Gregg and George Chryssides, include phenomenology; Wittgensteinian fideism, which privileges the beliefs of the insider; a textual emphasis; and reflexive ethnography (pp. 5–15). New methodologies discussed include Graham Harvey's idea of methodological guesthood. Following Robert Orsi ("Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?" 2003), the authors generally focus on structures and conditions giving rise to religious practices. This reflects a general shift in the study of religion to fieldwork. Yet questions of ethics, politics and psychology inevitably arise as well, as will be seen in the following discussion.

The collection divides the insider/outsider dynamic into two broad sections, the first centred on methodology, the second on identity. These broad categories are reasonable for such a broad subject. But other categorizations are possible. Using the idea of positionality, I have organized these articles into three levels: the culture, the belief system, and the institution. For convenience these can be labelled culture, religion, and church, with the understanding that these designations do not imply a strict categorization of the subject groups discussed by each author. Beyond these categories I add a few additional subheadings to reflect specific interest in ethics, ideology, conversion, and apostasy.

The best-known methodological position for fieldwork is participant observation, an approach that is foundational to anthropology. Participant observation became, over the course of the twentieth century, the default approach as the ideal of the researcher shifted from that of detached analyst to bicultural participant. The centrality of this methodology is reflected in the multitude of writings on the issues that crop up around participant-observation research (pp. 153–54).

Fieldwork always involves a degree of entanglement between researchers and informants. Many of the contributions make recommendations for how the researcher can overcome these complications of immersion. Researchers sometimes reflexively adopt a distancing stance, a kind of stoical agnosticism, towards the group under study. Ron Geaves proposes Graham Harvey's concept of methodological guesthood to overcome this tendency (pp. 53–69). Another contributor, Nina Hoel, acknowledges that while full detachment is impossible in the field, it is possible to develop a hyper-awareness of power constellations between researcher and participants in order to avoid power relations traps. She offers several methodological strategies, among them feminist epistemology and intersectionality. Conscious adoption of the standpoint of intersectionality, for instance, means affirming that systems of oppression go beyond gender. Such 'enfleshed lenses' can help combat pitfalls in fieldwork (pp. 88–109).

Steven Sutcliffe takes on one of the dominant models in the researcher's imaginary, the emic/etic binary. He provides a relevant summary of the debate between Kenneth Pike, who first proposed the emic/etic distinction, and the anthropologist Marvin Harris. According to Pike, etic distinctions are by nature cross-cultural, while the emic view is monocultural (p. 35). One implication of this model is the presupposition that the subject under study, for instance a religion or religious system, is a unified or coherent whole. This assumption of unity is difficult to maintain, because in practice individuals show extreme conflict and fluidity, and religious organizations shift constantly. For his part Harris does not argue *against* the emic/etic framework. Instead, he warns that emic categories are too easily mixed with scholarly preconceptions. The result is that much social science work becomes an idealization of the other and leads to a failure to consider the scholar's own culture (p. 37). One good example of this mixing, cited by Sutcliffe, is the category "New Age", a designation that scholars continue to use widely but is no longer a relevant label to many practitioners themselves (p. 42).

Lynne Scholefield explores another theoretical lens, Ken Wilber's integral theory, in order to cut through the complications of fieldwork. Wilber's theory incorporates a scheme with six ontological levels. Scholefield implies that researchers typically move to rationality as the default mode when evaluating phenomena, and hence miss the chance to understand the multitude of perspectives available in experience. Applying this scheme to such phenomena as conversion or magic means not rejecting the phenomenon as irrational, but accepting it as a phenomenon of a different level.

Stephen Jacobs argues that the researcher can adopt and maintain a middle position during ethnography that goes beyond the insider and outsider binary. His main target is the realistic ethnographic tradition, which presumes an outsider arrives, becomes familiar with the culture, and writes an objective account. In studying *The Art of Living* transnational movement, he found himself in the middle position, "observer-as-participant", torn between the poles of complete observer and complete participant (p. 225). To fight this binary, Jacobs suggests the practice of autoethnography. Jacobs offers two insights, despite traversing this well-trodden ground in anthropology. First, come what may, the observer needs to grasp the emic viewpoint. Second, Jacobs suggests that all ethnographic fieldwork is essentially "anecdotal" (p. 232). As he explains, the kind of understanding available from

ethnographic experience comes not in a smooth flow of data or a single revelation. Instead, the researcher mines the data for nuggets. While written accounts tend to obscure this fact, in the end no element of the fieldwork experience is fully in or out.

Marie Dallam addresses a specific aspect of fieldwork that is always fraught with difficulties: ethics. She specifically asks whether the researcher should be open about her research agenda *in every situation*. Dallam sees a valid distinction between covert and deceptive work, and argues that there is no pressing need to express different religious views from those held by the group under investigation (p. 72). Practically speaking, being overt makes it impossible to do research on some groups, for instance Pentecostals. She also makes the valid point that some religious groups do not always care about the researcher's beliefs; some may even see the researcher as no more than a potential convert (p. 73). At the same time, the researcher often gets caught up on a personal level with subjects. In reading Dallam's descriptions it is clear that the researcher is constantly negotiating and must make a slew of decisions every day. The researcher must always walk a fine line, deciding how much to participate in religious activities, and whether or not to join the religion. By the same token there are certainly clear ethical guidelines that cannot be overlooked.

In a similar vein to Dallam's thoughts on ethics, Tom Wilson explores the question of honesty. At first blush this question appears easy to dismiss: why not simply be open? Wilson finds the question to be complicated when it involves personal beliefs. How forthright should the researcher be? Enough to admit your beliefs contradict those of the informant? While the spirit of openness is admirable, there are circumstances in which informants will not talk to the researcher if they know they are under study. Another situation could involve the study of illegal activities. Like Dallam, Wilson concludes that covert research has a place. As he notes, "there is a rich ethical tradition of justifying deceit in certain circumstances", for instance when disclosure of the truth would result in harm (pp. 171–89).

Wilson's and Dallam's contributions remind us that fieldwork tests ethics. There are no clear-cut answers for many situations, and it is up to the researcher to work out ethical dilemmas, often on the spot. Wilson draws the line at using false pretensions for no reason other than to further one's career. Yet this does not preclude the option of *not* expressing one's views at every turn. The researcher, he contends, does not need to be forthright in every situation; evasive answers that do not mangle the truth are sometimes needed for the sake of the relationship. Surely this insight holds true in daily life as much as it does in the field—one should be truthful, but need not always be forthright. Yet this stance is bound to be controversial, since withholding knowledge can also be interpreted as a form of misleading the other. Fieldwork remains, as it has always been, an ethical minefield.

Moving beyond the difficulties of fieldwork, a large number of contributions focus on questions of religious membership. One variation on this question is the researcher's own positionality inside or outside a religion or a belief system. This is more than an extension of the ethnographer's dilemma, for group identity often dominates worldview. Rebecca Moore's experience with the Jonestown community, for instance, stretches over several decades, and throws doubt on the very adequacy of the techniques of participant observation. She describes her own experiences as "observant participation" instead or, better yet, "observant listening" (p. 159). Neutrality, she notes, is impossible once the researcher has been drawn into a community.

Katherine C. Rand describes yet another way of overcoming the status of being outside the religious tradition under study through what she calls a "practical" theology. Rand participated in a popular Islam retreat in Java, not as a retreatant, but as a researcher who nevertheless managed to maintain a quasi-insider status. The strategy worked well enough for

her to pick up important insights into the influence of *kejawan* (popular religion) on identity formation. She found that each of her three informants managed to negotiate their boundaries differently. Each was able to recognize an inner sense of plurality and so create an identity, which they in turn distinguish from a sense of belonging (p. 287). One informant, for instance, saw himself as a *diaphoron* person, one able to understand a pre-Islamic identity but not be controlled by it. There is, Rand finally concludes, no such thing as religious purity as it relates to individual identity.

In a similar move to Rand's quasi-observer practice, Fiona Bowie suggests ignoring minute insider/outsider concerns and instead taking a conscious position of blurred boundaries. Blurring the boundaries encourages taking a position of extreme empathy with the subjects, and opens the liberating possibility of the researcher's own loss of self as *an outsider*. This position in effect privileges experience as the primary source for religious imagination. Bowie notes, for example, that near-death experiences are nearly always explained religiously, regardless of other explanations (pp. 121–22).

Naomi Thurston tackles marginalization not as a method of inducing empathy, but as a strategy for scholarly survival. Her example concerns the field of Christian theology studies in China. Following the opening of Chinese academia in the 1980s, the first wave of scholars of Christianity limited their work to translations of western theology. There was no effort made to develop a Chinese theology (p. 191). (This is not to say that Chinese theology was not being created outside China, or within Chinese society but outside academia.) This period, recently labelled the “cultural-theological movement”, saw scholars intentionally position themselves at the margins of Chinese academia. In that way they did not need to align with any ideology, and enjoyed a reduced level of doctrinal imposition. By later adopting the term “Sino-language Christian theology”, these scholars avoided a sole focus on Christianity as a topic, and benefited from the study of “Chineseness”, which was then officially condoned (pp. 192–94).

Today, scholars in China stress the close connection between culture and religion. This has popularized the cross-cultural study of Christianity. Academic theology has morphed into a new formulation, “a theology of academic inquiry”, in the words of the scholar Zhou Xinping (p. 200). The “safe” object of study is now Christian culture, not Christian theology. This focus ties nicely with a major new strain of academic research in China, the unpacking of western thought (p. 202). Suddenly, a position that was on the margins—the study of Christian theology—has moved to the mainstream, and now holds the spotlight. Scholars have had to adapt to these shifting currents. Thurston's essay is a window into religious studies academia in China. But unlike the other papers in the collection, it does not investigate the individual researcher's fieldwork situation. It is, instead, an ideological insider/outsider conundrum, in which political considerations are never far off.

With many of the contributions the focus turns from questions of membership in a religion to division within it. Here we find researchers dealing with familiar topics in religious studies research: conversion, schism, and doctrinal division. While these are far from the only important questions in religious studies, they are never distant and can easily come to dominate discussion. The female ordination movement within Catholicism is one example. This movement, as described by Lyndel Spence, now includes more than 75 separate communities, organized into two primary groups, the Roman Catholic Womenpriests and the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests. Some 155 ordained female priests now administer the sacraments in churches affiliated with these two groups (p. 252). All ordained women and their supporters have been excommunicated by the Vatican, thus thrusting each person into a position of marginality. Surprisingly, the resulting “mantle

of ‘intersectionality’” has been embraced as members thrive within a deinstitutionalized space of religiosity. This deinstitutionalized space exists primarily on the internet, which is the focus of Spence’s study (p. 255). Rather than seeing the internet as a source of corruption, these communities perceive it as offering an alternative form of support that has been lacking from their lives since excommunication. Using Heidi Campbell’s religious-social shaping theory of religious influence on technology, Spence describes the relevant technologies behind this sense of liberation. In this case, she concludes, internet-based technology allows for the creation of religious solidarity through communal framing (p. 265).

Not all examples involve division between a dominant church and an offshoot. Andrew Lynch looks at the post-Vatican II Catholic Church and concludes that the image of the church as an anti-modernist “fortress-Catholicism” is not accurate. A range of voices promoting new visions exist within the church. In fact, the post-1960s church has seen an accommodation to diversity through recognition of a variety of specific groups, such as “youth”, which had no voice pre-Vatican II (p. 313). Nevertheless, the church remains under fire from a never-ending stream of social forces, such as postmodern forms of knowledge and subtle forms of secularism (p. 322). Lynch concludes that the Church will always grapple with such new forces, despite the reforms brought on by Vatican II. The question, then, is how an institution can be refashioned to meet contemporary needs. To what extent can change be generated from within?

Dan Cohn-Sherbok suggests a deep focus on the religious tradition as a way to move beyond the observer’s ethical quandaries (pp. 236–48). Through this move the observer position is erased, or at least recedes into the background, and the only insider/outsider situations are those existing within the tradition itself. With his example, Judaism, there is no shortage of group delineations to exemplify his point. He describes the various streams of Judaism in turn, from orthodox, Hasidism, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Humanistic, focusing on how each developed from the mainstream. It is undeniable that a full understanding of any religious tradition demands a careful parsing of the distinctions that count to informants. It remains a truism that every religious tradition will concern itself with such distinctions, regardless of the ethical or methodological positionality of the researcher.

Claire Miller Skriletz continues the focus on the group’s positionality, this time vis-à-vis mainstream culture. This topic is a major focus in the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs), which over the years has concluded that the degree of estrangement from society is a major factor in NRM identity. Skriletz focuses on ethnic Buddhist groups such as the Buddhist Churches of America. While expressing frustrations with common binaries found in religious studies—Asian/white, immigrant/resident, ethnic/convert—she struggles to offer a viable replacement for these dichotomies. Skriletz finally expresses a preference for the broad but reliable categories of “tradition” and “branch” to describe religious groups (p. 294). Admittedly, her focus on emplacement and lineage is necessary as a way to avoid the received depictions of groups. Ultimately, though, each scholar is taxed with coming up with the formulation that helps them make sense of the material collected, including the distinctions that count for informants; no over-arching framework can save us from all complexities of positionality.

Janet B. Eccles’ study of reflexive switchers and holistic switchers refocuses the question of transformation back to the level of the individual. Reflexive switchers, or affiliates, move from one form of Christianity to another. Holistic switchers, or disaffiliates, move from formal Christianity to a kind of holistic spirituality that includes elements of Christianity (p. 332). All her informants fall somewhere on a spectrum from traditional practice to “new” spiritual

practitioners, in effect within the New Age milieu. Instead of seeing them as examples of conversion, Eccles sees these shifts as “situational practices” that help individuals adapt to life challenges (p. 345). All positions involve some mix of the religious and the spiritual with the secular. Eccles concludes that the insider/outsider paradigm is not helpful in describing these evolving positions in life. She recommends instead worldview analysis as an analytical framework.

Stephen Gregg and Aled Thomas explore “outsider” religious organizations with reference to the Free Zone, the field of all independent Scientology communities. Non-affiliated organizations in Scientology are not new; the first dates from Ron’s Org, established by Captain Bill Robertson in 1984 (p. 354). Since Free Zone groups did not have the same organization and methods in place as mainstream Scientology, they tended to develop their own methods of auditing and teachings, while remaining within what they saw as the Ron Hubbard tradition. Ron’s Org, for instance, is not hierarchical, and there is no case supervisor. Since some groups left the mainstream with Hubbard’s death in 1986, their practices have seldom evolved. Such groups have in fact proven to be more conservative than the Scientology organization itself. Gregg and Thomas conclude that the various indie groups have little in common besides opposition to mainstream Scientology (pp. 356–61).

Again, relating group membership with individual identity, Gregg and Thomas posit a dynamic relationship between institution and individual, mediated by technological and ritual practices. Both inside and outside mainstream Scientology, each individual continues to maintain complex ties with the religion of Scientology. Therefore, it is not meaningful to talk about membership alone as a strict determinant of being inside or out. As already noted in other examples, individual religious identity rarely fits into binary frameworks.

The collection’s penultimate study, by George Chryssides, continues the focus on the individual by discussing apostates, believers who leave a religion. At first glance apostates appear to move from being insiders to outsiders, but this apparent clarity must be approached carefully. Researchers must use the testimonies of ex-members with care, since many will relate tales of injustice or even atrocities to justify their departures. The recent series of Netflix specials on former Amish or Scientology members often depict the religion in a negative, even sensationalized light. Yet none of this necessarily means the individual has “left” the religion. As Chryssides notes, ex-members in fact fall along a spectrum, from those going completely secular to those who continue to practice and believe yet do so outside the community (p. 376). Like all human organizations, members come and go. At the psychological level, the decision to leave may reflect a waning of belief in some of the benefits of membership, for instance the need to be in a supportive community. There truly are fifty ways to leave your religion, some with only mild ramifications and others that may place your life in danger.

Chryssides next moves to focus on one specific type of leaver, the schismatic, whose departure can have a considerable impact on the organization’s sustainability over time. The schismatic, by definition, leaves to form his or her own group. The Unification Church, ISKCON, and Scientology offer pertinent examples. The impact of schismatics is amplified by those who depart together with a schismatic leader. No matter what the reason for mass defections—and some leave involuntarily—they usually amount to a serious body blow to the original religious group. The sixteenth-century departure of congregations and principalities from the Catholic Church is a stark example of the vast scale of schismatic realignment. Such shuffling and jockeying for souls is a regular occurrence in the field of new religious studies, one that deserves greater study than has been given in the past.

Carole Cusack also deals with ex-members. She situates these concerns within the field of conversion and apostasy studies. She studies an intentional community Kerista Commune and a Gurdjieff offshoot, the School of Economic Science. Both groups once again prove that after leaving, ex-members remain enmeshed in the original group in one way or another. Indeed, it is valid to say that few ex-members fully “leave” (p. 394).

Cusack promotes a cultural approach to religious studies that will reveal a nuanced landscape not overshadowed by theology, power relations, or such other dominant models as evolution (p. 396). This method paves the way for scholars to approach conversion through unpacking the individual moral dimension. Kerista, an intentional community started by Jud Presmont in 1956, disbanded in 1991, but continues as a community of sorts online. The School of Economic Science was founded by Leonardo da Vinci MacLaren in 1937 on ideas influenced by Gurdjieff and Hinduism. In the Kerista case, ex-members were without exception hostile to the organization and its leadership, but remained “believers” in group doctrines and the value of the group’s teachings. Therefore it is not, argues Cusack, correct to see ex-members of either group as “outsiders” (p. 410). In other words, for these ex-members there was no specific “apostasy moment”, just as there was never any “conversion moment” (p. 410). Clearly, the boundaries of religious identity were fluid.

The Insider/Outsider Debate is important for raising a number of significant issues relating to positionality. The question of inside or outside *what* depends on the writer’s focus. There are, firstly, various ways to position oneself as a researcher. Scholars must be adept at self-definition and explanation, while managing issues of intersectionality, ethics and openness. Focus on the individual (believer, informant, member) brings different perspectives. People flow in and out of religious affiliations. In some cases, affiliative “purity” may be of ultimate concern; in others it may be simply tactical, or simply irrelevant. Between the informant and the researcher stands the group, in religious contexts often a religious organization. The institution has boundaries and is concerned with such *membership* issues as recruitment or defection. But fluidity appears to be much rarer for institutions than it is for the fieldwork researcher or the informant. The amorphous religious group, whose outlines are barely visible in the early stages of a movement, is impelled to quickly gel and firm up its foundations.

Like all meaningful contributions to methodology, this volume succeeds in broadening perspective by raising more questions. This reviewer concludes that insider/outsider distinctions are of prime importance at the institutional level. This leads to the suspicion that the insider and outsider question is of deep concern in so far as it relates to another institutional field, the profession of religious studies. Who *does* religious studies, and how porous are the boundaries around participation in that field? These questions could easily fill an additional volume of insider/outsider essays.