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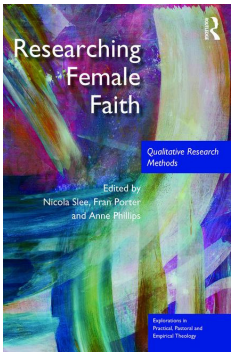

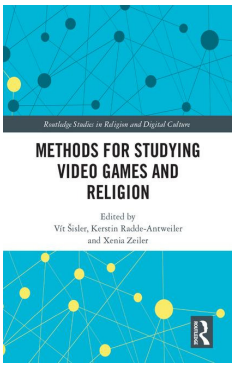

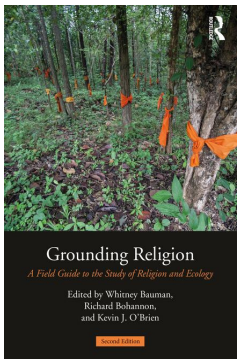

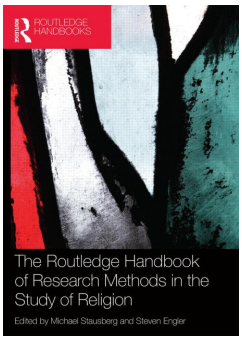

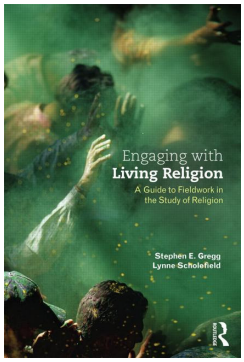

1 'Come as a girl'

Exploring issues of participative methodology for research into the spiritual lives and faith of girls-becoming-women

Anne Phillips

Introduction

Across the Western world in recent years, multiple reports from statutory and voluntary bodies based on interviews with girls and young women reveal the effects of the gender-based pressures in their everyday experience, physical, social and psychological.[1] In one response, Laura Bates, founder of the *Everyday Sexism Project*[2] in 2012, reminds girls that: 'You're not defined by your gender, your body, or what anybody else says about you. Only you get to decide who you are'.[3] When I conducted my research with girls aged 11–13 in churches during 2004–2005,[4] issues of body image, discrimination and sexualization were concerns that they raised spontaneously. Georgia observed how girls 'were "hardly ever happy" about their body image', upset there was something wrong, and thinking they were 'either a bit too short or a bit too big'.[5] Hannah reflected on gendered peer stereotyping: 'sometimes boys say if you want to play football, "you're not a boy, you don't know how to play"', and on the injustice of staff discrimination: 'in class, when the teachers ask you to go and get boxes, they never ask girls, but girls are as strong as boys'.

Lucy, approaching teen years, was conscious of the increased and constraining sexualization suggested by adults over mixed friendships: 'there's quite a few boys in my class who I get on really well with, but if you're seen with boys it's considered straight away that it's girlfriend/boyfriend and it's not!'[6]

I open my chapter with these accounts to illustrate the reality of the world girls inhabit to the increasing detriment of their flourishing. Where girls are involved in the life of faith communities, there is both the need and the opportunity to work with them to connect life and faith, and to draw on the resources of spirituality to help build their resilience and gendered self-confident awareness. Obsession with body image, and low self-esteem, are not only psychological and health issues, they are profoundly spiritual.[7] In working with girls, it is inadequate for adults to determine programmes and support structures claiming to understand their lives based on their own memories and perceptions of adolescence, for 'their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams'.[8] Only those living in that liminal place in each discrete generation can tell it as it is for them in its particularity. The role of their

adult accompanists is to enable them to voice and reflect on their experiences, to listen and learn from their thoughts and feelings, and to offer informed support and advocacy through all aspects of their growth towards full flourishing. This must rest on good qualitative research engaging girls as participants, requiring researchers to adopt creative and reflexive methodologies. In this chapter, I will examine the participative nature of the methodology and methods I used, within the constraints of a faith community, and in conversation with other examples of research methodologies demonstrating varying levels and models of participation.[9]

Girls within childhood research: the contemporary scene

I begin with a summary of the current state of research with girls/boys,[10] which from early years to adulthood is flourishing: normatively now employing feminist and liberation methodologies, methods are increasingly participatory. Most research is, however, conducted in the fields of education, health, psychology or the social sciences, fields where significant funding is forthcoming, and takes place almost exclusively in institutional settings. Inclusion of young people as active participants reflects their acceptance not only as research subjects but also in some instances as researchers. These issues, along with their corresponding philosophical and epistemological bases, are well represented in the contemporary literature on research with children and young people.[11]

Underpinning the trend towards greater participation is the political impetus enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, followed in the UK by the Children Act (1989) and Every Child Matters (2003), which underlies the Children Act (2004) and all of which promote both the empowerment of children and young people to make a positive contribution to society, and also their rights among which is that to impact the issues and services that affect them.[12]

Participation in research ranges from being simply an active subject in a predetermined process to full adherence to the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), an umbrella term for a variety of action-oriented research whereby researcher and participants 'work together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better'.[13] Using context-specific methods researchers seek to engage participants in 'genuinely democratic and non-coercive research with and for, rather than on, participants'.[14] Seminal texts defining the concept and examining the construction of theoretical participatory frameworks with girls/boys, models by which social research is both informed and evaluated, are Hart's 'Ladder of Children's Participation', which traces it through hierarchical stages from tokenism to full participation, and Shier's alternative model focusing more on adult roles. Both are designed to assist practitioners to explore different aspects of the participation process.[15] Girls/boys are now seen as broadly competent agents, their competence being different from but not lesser than adults', and their knowledge as rooted in

lived experience, so a research methodology in which they are engaged in some way as partners is the most appropriate.

Since most childhood research is conducted in social and political contexts, discussion of the methodological framework of participatory research takes place almost exclusively in relation to institutions and services that govern the lives of young people, and most commonly focuses on cognitive skills and functional outcomes in the social or built environment. Empowerment of young people in these areas has, potentially, far-reaching consequences in capacity building as they engage with social and political structures and contribute to community enhancement. Through being enshrined in a very broad sense in legislation and good practice guidelines, *spirituality* has gained some acceptance as contributing to a girl's/boy's well-being, and has been the subject of some research mainly in educational and medical arenas. However, confessional *faith* as an application of spirituality, and *gender* specificity or differentiation within the spiritual life, have received scant attention. So, despite the prevalence of *childhood* research and some research into *spirituality*, girls' inner relational worlds and their faith lives in the context of their places of worship, have largely been neglected as subjects for empirical study.[16] In studying the *faith of girls*, I am therefore breaking the silence in two areas of research.[17]

Participation within my research methodology

All research is participative in that it requires the acquisition of data from consenting subjects. However, as a qualitative methodology participative research indicates active engagement with the process by the subject, including in the research design, determination of topic and methods, conduct of the enquiry, data analysis and in some cases active pursuit of named goals. It is also imprecise and contested in its meaning and practice: strongly advocated at different levels by practitioners in child research, its claims as well as its epistemology and ontology are also challenged, as in the work of geographers Lesley-Anne Gallacher and Michael Gallagher.[18] On the grounds that participatory methodologies retain power imbalances, they propose an alternative model, or rather attitude, of 'methodological immaturity' on the part of the researcher and the child, to which I shall return later.

I have briefly outlined participative methodology's parameters as the framework within which to evaluate my own practice: while following much good practice in childhood research, my work also illustrates some of the questions raised by Gallacher and Gallagher particularly as it relates to the conduct of research with girls/boys in the voluntary sector, and specifically in a faith community, a context imposing restraints as well as opportunities not found in formal or state institutions. The researcher in a faith community usually has limited choice in levels of participation, and my chosen methodology necessitated some compromises, but for me the key ontological and epistemological tenets mirroring those fundamental to current theories of childhood theory were non-negotiable. The aim of my research was both to contribute to girls'

empowerment within the adult-constructed community, and to exercise wider advocacy on their behalf. The girls I worked with had their own unique appropriation and practise of faith, and this I aimed to explore in its particularity,[19] while also in my analysis seeking commonalities within the age range across different churches both to inform, and to instigate debate among, church leaders working with girls in their personal and developmental transitions. These research goals, then, guided the development of my methodology, the desire to identify and advocate new and potentially transferable knowledge, and create an opportunity for empowerment by encouraging new thinking and gendered spiritual awareness. Since I also had an ethical responsibility to be respectful of the norms and beliefs of their current ecclesial heritage, it felt at times like walking a methodological tightrope.

The methodology in practice

In my empirical research, then, conducted in churches with varied demographic profiles, ecclesial style and theological stance, I planned for girls to be active participants as far as was practicable working within the social constraints consequent on church attendance being a voluntary pursuit, and the institutional constraints arising from my 'intrusion' into the privately organized and controlled space of a church. My own active participation required careful negotiation and practise of reflexivity, both with the churches' leaderships and within myself as researcher, educator and faith practitioner.

The research took place in the girls' normal meeting times in their churches, usually on a Sunday, so scope for extensive contact and complex engagement was limited. There are other difficulties intrinsic to working in the voluntary sector not encountered in statutory or public settings: these further challenge and frustrate researchers. Finding a sufficiently varied set of churches with enough girls in my chosen age range to form a viable group was one problem, another that I was working full-time as a minister alongside part-time research, and self-funding so distance of travel affected the choice of geographical location. The churches I recruited held their own programmes with young people, and time available with them was both precious and pressurized; to gain their release from their planned programme was part of the negotiation with the gatekeepers. The maximum time allocation agreed upon was four or five weekly sessions of up to an hour each, while on two occasions the research took place on one Sunday only and consisted of shared congregational worship, a meal together and an afternoon session. Despite this variation, each was comparable in the level of participation, relationships built, ground covered and data collected.

To what extent, though, could the girls become active research participants under these conditions? Without preparatory access to the girls to engage them in any advance planning, and to maximize use of the time available, I prepared a structure for each session to create immediate momentum as well as some comparability across my resulting data for analytical purpose. I drew inspiration both from my previous experience as a secondary school teacher and from

interactive models used in other research projects into childhood spirituality consistent with my epistemological framework.[20] The girls knew the broad area of my research, so after playful introductions to each other, we set ground rules and I offered to hand to them the control of the tape recorder. I opened the conversation by asking what they enjoyed, and later disliked, about being a girl, in order to help them centre on their own gendered identity as the standpoint from which they were thinking and speaking. As I re-read the transcripts now and analyse my role as interviewer to assess how far I encouraged the girls to exert influence on the direction of and agenda for discussion, I see there was usually a balance between giving space for their chatter[21] on a tangential topic onto which they deviated and my own seizure of openings to move the conversation on; otherwise my interventions were largely for clarification and to facilitate inclusion. I was constantly alert to and learning from the themes that were of significance; these were largely predictable, dominated by school, friendships and family, but I noted the mature way they were reflecting on these subjects particularly in the light of changes taking place over time in themselves and their contexts.

As I had no prior relationship with the girls, and couldn't predict how the conversations might flow, I had devised a 'worksheet' of questions and activities to use if necessary.[22] Thankfully, I didn't need it: to do so would have introduced a pedagogical tone that would have affected adversely my relationship with the girls, and the delightful freedom of thought they demonstrated. They entered enthusiastically into the activities, and as a direct result of our interaction, I was able to tweak some in subsequent research locations to greater effectiveness. The most significant activity was visual as they responded to images they selected from a range I had prepared, and through which we began to engage more deeply with overtly existential and spiritual issues. On one occasion these gave rise to further spontaneous 'faithing' conversation when the girls gathered of their own accord round a pool table where I'd placed the pictures, but I was unable to draw on this later, they having decided to switch off the recording equipment. Participation doesn't always work to the researcher's advantage! With some girls, in group activities and in personal interviews, God-talk came more readily than others and although sometimes formulaic at the outset, given time and careful listening both within the group and individually, many moved significantly beyond verbal and conceptual dependence and came to a freedom of expression on matters of faith that I consider demonstrated original thinking and modes of believing. It was where we discussed biblical characters and narrative that I had to exert a strong level of reflexivity, endeavouring to remain in research mode and resisting the temptation to turn educator especially where knowledge, most notably of biblical women, was lacking.

How participative does participative research need to be?

The extent to which my methodology was participative is the question I now address, as I engage in dialogue with other participative childhood research

projects. I have selected examples whose methodologies, on the continuum of participation, might be described as 'less' and 'more', although that might be too simplistic a differentiation.[23] They address two questions raised by my methodology: can a predominantly adult-led process of activity and interview such as I used encourage genuine self-disclosure, reflection and empowerment; and can the constraints of research in the voluntary sector, specifically in faith communities, enhance the potential for participative research? The first two examples compare levels of participation, one adult-led, the other shared between researcher and participants; my third example discusses participative research in a faith community.

Two adult-led research projects

The first example is part of a wider project by Anna Lipscomb and Irvine Gersch to develop a 'spiritual listening tool' to explore girls'/boys' understanding about spiritual and philosophical meaning in their lives and enhance their 'spiritual questing'.[24] It was fully adult designed and led, which appeared at first sight to minimize the potential for the subjects' participation. In individual interviews, the girls/boys aged 10–11 from local schools chose, in their own order, to talk about one-word concepts (such as 'happiness', 'destiny') from among six cards set in front of them. The interview proceeded through a highly structured process within which the interviewer's role was limited to checking participants' understanding of words and offering prompts to stimulate their thinking. Thus the young people exerted choices and to a significant degree controlled input within the process, the interview being time- not completion-bound. On this basis the researchers claim the elicitation of valid and original data, facilitated but uninfluenced by adult intervention; power of expression lay with the subjects, the researcher having no relational engagement with them, while respecting their being and agency. Examples from the research findings demonstrate positive outcomes for the girls/boys as well as the researchers, who concluded that the 'children appeared to make a link between concrete or "*visible*" elements of their life (e.g. behaviour or lived experience) and metaphysical or "*hidden*" elements (underlying beliefs or world view). The children could then reflect on these new understandings'.[25] They documented how within the space offered by a spiritual listener, change and growth had taken place in the participants, including in Evren who, reflecting on the session, said: 'After I said all these things and I can't believe that I really said it, there's change in me'. The aim of this on-going project is to develop the listening tool and 'explore links between children's spirituality and measures of self-esteem and happiness'.[26]

Although here the interviewer plays an apparently minimal role and the process is highly structured and unbending, its positive outcomes are the result of carefully constructed guidance through the 'probes' and questions, alongside space and affirmation through attentive listening; together they develop participants' thinking in an unhurried and individual way. The researchers' analysis demonstrates a growth of participants' meaning-making skill helping to foster spirituality as it contributes to holistic living. I see a parallel here with the

positive contribution to my research of my own listening, and careful prompts to encourage deeper thought, while also allowing my participants to take some control of the pace of the process. Perhaps there is a greater level of participation in the 'spiritual listening' approach than I initially judged.

I now turn to a second research project similar in its adult construction because, like mine, it was conducted in leisure space, and the researchers faced similar hurdles to my own in setting it up. It also demonstrates a different and more contestable means of encouraging free thought on the part of young people. In their study with an inter-faith youth project, Catherine Harris and her colleagues experimented, alongside more conventional research methods, with a videoed diary room on the model of that used in the TV reality show 'Big Brother', with minimal evident presence of the observing researchers.[27] In this private space an unseen researcher led a conversation on designated topics chosen randomly by each individual participant speaking only to a camera: all were keen to take part through its novelty, yet on-screen familiarity. Despite there being no rapport between the mysterious 'voice' and the participant, in itself a learning experience for the researcher engaging with an interviewee without non-verbal codes, the resulting video showed that the young people expressed more honest opinions than they had done in other activities in the public space. Although the power of questioning was in the adult's hands, the researcher felt a greater degree of *dis*empowerment as the young people took control of the apparently vacant diary space, trusting its confidentiality to express themselves freely. Unlike in the TV version, the interviewer was a complete stranger having had no prior contact with any of the young people nor involvement with the other activities in the club so although representing adult 'authority', their invisibility appeared to level the playing field of power and not to inhibit the interviewee, whereas a pilot study in the club using traditional methods had, they said, been unsuccessful. By comparing the diary room data with that from semi-structured interviews and other more conventional activities of the evening, Harris *et al.* affirm its value for increasing the knowledge gained. Whether such a method would enhance research within a faith community would depend on whether the quality of adult/child relating around a shared belief and value system created a more positive environment for openness and honesty than in a secular organization. This is where the totality of the context, some ethnographic awareness, may assist the construction of an appropriate methodology. Nonetheless it offers an interesting complement to the previous example, and I concur with Harris *et al.* that there is potential here for further experimentation. Of importance too is evaluation of this method within the wider debates about the influence of social media on, and its use by, young people, a discussion that is outside the scope of this chapter.

A project modelling shared participation

For contrast, I turn to a project employing a methodology in which the subjects participated fully from inception right through to data analysis

and public presentation. Based on an established Scandinavian 'study circle tradition with democratic ideals', Jeanette Åkerström and Elinor Brunnberg developed a 'research circle' method,[28] which documents the learning nine girls aged 15–19 undertook to become full partners in a research project: this included topic identification, interview and analytical skills, and research ethics. Foundational to the project was the conviction that young people are able to acquire the necessary skills to conduct valid and rigorous research, an issue contested on the grounds that age and cognitive development determine competence. 'Reflecting on the skills needed to undertake research it is apparent that these are not synonymous with being an adult; they are synonymous with being a researcher': this is the view of Mary Kellett who, through extensive work with the UK-based Children's Research Centre (CRC) she founded to facilitate child-led research, offers plentiful evidence for her conclusion that 'a barrier to empowering children as researchers is not their lack of adult status but their lack of research skills' and that, as for any new researcher, these skills can be learnt.[29]

Like the CRC's work, the Scandinavian research circle justifies this claim. It was substantially child-led, the girls equipped to conduct it from start to finish with varying levels of input from the researchers. The girls became research partners under the guidance of two academic researchers, a circle leader (responsible for the conduct of the meetings) and a research leader (holding a overview of the process). Instigated and explained by researchers, the project was then progressed principally by the partners (the girls) who selected a topic using multiple methods of enquiry, engaged in discussion and collected their data, all in mutual interaction with the research leaders. For example, as they reflected on their data, the partners were helped to try out different forms of interpretation, while in return the partners helped the researchers to identify generational issues and perspectives that challenged their adult understanding of the topic. Learning was thus two-way, and a body of knowledge was being created from the perspective of the girls. The partners received training in methodological and analytical processes influenced by Lev Vygotsky's two-pronged theory that: a) in a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) cognitive development occurs in the space opened up by social learning, and b) social development is supported by the 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) who provides and adapts the 'scaffolding' as the partner becomes more skilled. In the process, empirical learning becomes earthed in theoretical knowledge acquired through exploratory activity, and transferable skills are learned. Åkerström and Brunnberg confirm the reciprocity within this process as the girls were correspondingly able to act as MKOs for the researchers when they shared their contemporary experiences and perspectives.[30]

Fully aware that overall power remained in adults' hands, Åkerström and Brunnberg bring strong reflexivity to bear on the asymmetric nature of the relationship with the girls, recognizing the fragile balance between partners and leaders at every stage, and the ease with which the researcher, with an eye to the eventual 'audience' for the research findings, might compromise the

young people's perspectives, for example, by 'a tentative categorization in the conceptualization stage of the research process'.[31] The girls' ownership of the project, engendered in no small part by their participation in design and execution, was illustrated by their willingness to devote significant leisure time to it: not only were they fully committed but showed an impatience with the adult timescale, arranging extra meetings to speed up the process, reflecting a 'here-and-now' attitude made possible by social media. The report of the project validates the interactive process where participation is built into the methodology, demonstrating the social learning and capacity building that resulted for the young people, and the building of respectful inter- and intra-generational relationships despite asymmetry.

Could I have emulated a model such as this, to engage the girls more substantially in the research process? Here again context plays a key role. Such research requires extended contact between researcher and researched, and 'extra-curricular' time commitment by the participants. I was reluctant to add to the pressures on them particularly from schoolwork, considerable even at that age, by requesting 'homework' between sessions such as took place in Åkerström and Brunnberg's project, although this might have increased their participation and ownership of the research, and the breadth or depth of the level of enquiry. When it came to my analysis, I was conscious of a time lag after the interviews during which the girls' memories of what they said would have dimmed or become a cause of embarrassment, and any subsequent participation would have been influenced by changes to their thinking and believing beyond the research data gathering. It would not, therefore, have been productive to have reflected with the girls on my analysis as in other circumstances I might have done. I had captured a snapshot of immense research value at a particular point in time, and had to preserve the credibility of my outcomes. Although this is also a consequence of part-time academic research, it also reflects the necessity for immediacy if young people are to be full participants. This is not to say that, as the research circle experience shows, where girls seize the initiative themselves, they might not engage fruitfully with all levels of the enquiry.

Researching in a faith community

A faith community context offers circumscribed opportunities for conducting academic research, yet there are positive factors too that can enhance the project.

As with most research with young people, initial contact is made in negotiation with gatekeepers who retain the power of access. These youth or church leaders can be valuable assets as resource people. I interviewed one or more in each location, and they provided insightful background to each context. Physical constraints are often imposed by limited time-allocation and sometimes less than optimum research spaces, in my case a minister's vestry, or side rooms with furniture ill-suited to either comfort or activity. These are factors I accepted and accommodated to as researcher since the faith *community*, the

location in which girls absorb, learn and practise their faith, can offer strong support to the quality of the research despite any material limitations. It is also where any outworking of the research by the girls takes place, outcomes hopefully resulting in their further empowerment, and enhanced application of critical skills to their faithing. For me to spend time with the girls in worship, learning and leisure served a purpose beyond the gathering of ethnographic data: it engaged me as participant in the girls' faith lives not just as a prelude but as integral to mutual participation in the research activity. Hence, the level of participation in structuring and executing my design is not the only measure by which to assess my methodology for its participative strength. A personal relationship had been established that, while inevitably retaining asymmetry, had lessened the effect of the power imbalance. This was aided in no small way by the fact that I was interviewing the girls in their own spaces whether in church or a home: I was thus a visitor submitting to their unknown customs and rules, and by so doing ceding more power to them. The importance of this is not often recognized but should not be underestimated for its enhancement of a research process with young people, maybe especially girls. Eleanor Nesbitt is an advocate of this practice in places of worship, to ground the process in 'observation and incipient insights from the field, . . . ease the relationship between interviewer and interviewee . . . and encourage children's confidence in speaking about these areas of their experience'.[32] In considering the importance of spatial context, Harris *et al.* note that the club premises in which they operated was one 'in which the children and young people have more agency than at school. . . . In this setting the young people were to some extent "in charge"'.[33]

A working example of the benefit to researching in this way is supplied by Cathy Ota who, in the course of her work with the Children and WorldViews Project team, describes her own journey of learning at the hands of three 6-year-old girls. In this particular project, she was engaging with school teachers to explore ways of addressing spiritual, moral and emotional development through the potential offered by story-telling.[34] Admitting she had 'no fixed model of what we were going to do or what was going to happen' with such young girls, Ota met weekly with them and their teacher to hear the personal stories they were eager to tell. The project achieved its aim of developing narrative skills, but more pertinent to this discussion is Ota's account of her own move from visiting researcher to genuine participant, on the girls' own terms. Attempting to remain within her comfort zone as the dispassionate outsider, she became 'as much a part of the dialogue and relationality as the girls', drawn in by them to share her own story through which the power imbalance was lessened: 'this' she says, 'was fast becoming a very different kind of ball game – not the kind of participation that I was used to'. Through the experience Ota learnt that despite her theoretical regard for children's voices, she had still seen them as 'other', yet they, sensing her 'otherness', strove to draw her into a caring relationship with them. She argues that this contributed to the achievement of the research goal, the growth in their narrative skills. An unforeseen

by-product of her research design was therefore the 'impact of all participants in such a process' which 'revealed what to me are important lessons about meeting beliefs, values and community, about engaging with difference and diversity'.[35] These younger girls, by taking power upon themselves to extend participation, played an active role in creating a more mutually participative methodology. Although the example here was of a different age group and culture from that of my research where there was a cultural consonance between researcher and researched, there was still diversity between myself and the participants through age and experience. Ota's project contributed to my reflection on the influence of the wider context on my research when I shared games, a family lunch, a barbecue and worship both formal and informal with the girls. I argue, then, that integral to a successful operation of a participative methodology with young people, especially girls, is an investment of 'downtime' as a guest in their space as a strategy not just to counter power asymmetry but to build relationships that become an unquantifiable factor in creating quality data from all activities within the research programme.

This also concurs with the reminder from Gallacher and Gallagher that 'knowledge is thoroughly relational' and created, or co-created, through narrative and conversation. Rethinking the current paradigm of children's agency, and reflecting on their respective experiences of childhood research, they propose that methodological immaturity allows the freedom for researchers to recognize their own incompleteness, without which they would not be undertaking the research. 'For us', they say, 'research is fundamentally a process of *muddling through*, sometimes feeling lost and out of place, asking stupid questions, being corrected and having our preconceptions destroyed. In this way, we cannot deny our incompetence and vulnerabilities: our immaturity. And we do not want to'. Their concern is not with methods, but with the methodological attitude of the researcher: my somewhat messy research experience resonates with their view that 'good research cannot be reduced to ingenious techniques, planned in advance and carefully applied. Research is inherently unpredictable: the best laid plans are liable to go awry. Methodological immaturity privileges open-ended process . . . offering experimentation, innovation and "making do"'.[36] Each participant, researcher and researched, are players in this game, creating a newly emergent but vulnerable subjectivity, an insight that resonates with my own experience, and opens my methodological approach to further study and debate.

These reflections on my methodology also suggest that in addition to facilitating research by an outsider such as I was, a faith community is well positioned for appropriately trained and skilled youth leaders also to introduce research-based learning into their programme. Focusing on existential or practical issues relevant to young people and to the community, this could enable girls/boys to integrate critical skills already part of the school curriculum with their spiritual lives, supporting their informed growth in faith and thus empowerment. Such capacity building for young people, taking their place as participants at the centre of community life rather than at the margins many currently inhabit, could represent an investment in the community's future.

Conclusion

My commitment to growing my own understanding of the specificity of being a girl in a rapidly changing world, and encouraging others to do likewise, is born out of my own long experience of voicelessness, sexism and discrimination as woman, feminist, mother and Christian minister. Evidence from the reports with which I opened this chapter reveals that varieties of oppression of girls have increased and intensified in the ten years since I conducted my empirical research. Spirituality is recognized as a component of healthy living; faith communities are in a position to offer substantial interventions in support of girls as they negotiate adolescence in the hostile environment of the Western world where race, dress, class, sexual orientation and gender become means by which they are demeaned and often bullied, subjected to what can justifiably be described systemic oppression.

The projects that have resourced my critique all encourage participation on a variety of models, and when set in dialogue with my research shed fresh light on aspects of participatory methodologies as they apply to faith communities. All methods were shaped by conversation, some highly relational, others barely so. Gendered data analysis of research among girls/boys is sadly rare, and does not feature explicitly in any of the reports cited. Even among the projects in which girls alone were the subjects, their gender was coincidental. That the girls Ota studied were Asian, a little researched demographic group, and that her work may 'go some way to redress this situation',[37] is seen as a by-product of a project where the girls participated in and changed both research and researcher by enacting a traditionally female 'ethic of care'. This feature is not discussed. It would be enlightening to undertake a gendered analysis of the data from the 'Spiritual Listening' project, additionally to assess whether there were variables according to gender in the responses to the method: this would contribute to an appreciation of the scope of its applicability. The Big Brother experiment does not record the ratio of male to female participants, this in spite of it being part of an international research project studying difference across a range of social categories.[38] More analysis is needed, then, of gender differentiation in the responses to particular methodologies, to aid our understanding of the degree to which research methods lend themselves not only to eliciting meaningful data from girls, but contributing positively to the growth of their gendered self-awareness, of the distinctness and validity of their faithing, and in their confidence to identify gender-based oppression as they meet it.

My research was a beginning: there is much still to be developed in this field. Appropriately gathered, original data from girls and its analysis with and by researchers, is an offering to faith communities to enable their voices to be heard, to encourage those communities to support them in their resistance and engender their resilience, to the enrichment of girls' faith journeys as they get to decide who they are becoming on their way to womanhood.

Notes

1 Examples of such reports can be found in: American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls, Executive Summary*, accessed 1 November 2016, www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-summary.pdf; *Girlguiding Girls' Attitudes Survey*, accessed 6 December 2016, www.girlguiding.org.uk/social-action-advocacy-and-campaigns/research/girls-attitudes-survey; NHS Confederation, accessed 6 December 2016, www.nhsconfed.org/news/2016/09/the-adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey; and in journals, e.g. Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie and Andrei Cimplan, 'Gender Stereotypes about Intellectual Ability Emerge Early and Influence Children's Interests', *Science* 355, no. 6323 (January 2017): 389–391, accessed 27 January 2017, doi: 10.1126/science.aah6524.

2 http://everydaysexism.com/, accessed 1 November 2016.

3 Laura Bates, *Girl Up* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 374.

4 Anne Phillips, *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2011). All names used are pseudonyms.

5 Ibid., 89.

6 ibid., 76.

7 As in Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Feminist Exploration in Boundaries and Transgressions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007).

8 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (London: Heinemann, 1926), 20. Discussion of the issue from an academic perspective can be found in, for example: Catherine Harris and Gill Valentine, 'Childhood Narratives: Adult Reflections on Encounters with Difference in Everyday Spaces', *Children's Geographies* (2017): 1–12, accessed 4 January 2017, doi:10.1080/14733285.2016.1269153.

9 Although writing from a Christian perspective, I cite examples from research with young people of other religions: this chapter has relevance for most mainstream faith communities.

10 Except in quotations and unless sense demands otherwise, I adopt this term, as in *The Faith of Girls*, in preference to 'childhood' to highlight the significance of gender in childhood. Although my research, and the focus of this chapter, is on girls, my discussion on research methodology could also be applicable to boys, and under-18s identifying as LGBTI or (increasingly among young people) gender fluid.

11 See Alison Clark *et al.*, *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*, (Oxford and London: The Open University and Sage, 2014).

12 The terminology, and implementation, of policies regarding children and young people in the UK are subject to regular change by successive governments: at the time of writing, information can be found at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education, accessed 1 February 2017.

13 For an account and evaluation of PAR particularly in the social and environmental sciences, see Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby, *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

14 Ibid., p 2.

15 Roger Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. (Florence: UNICEF, 1992): Harry Shier, 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations', *Children and Society* 15 (2001): 107–117.

16 Some related studies from the USA can be found in Evelyn L. Parker, ed. *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), and Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

17 I use 'spirituality' here to refer broadly to 'human meaning-making' in the context of perceived or experienced 'otherness', and 'faith' to denote trust in and relationship with a divine 'Other', usually lived out in some connection with a faithing community. A full discussion of the terms, and of 'faith' as an active verb, will be found in Phillips, *Faith of Girls*, 9–13.
18 Lesley-Anne Gallacher and Michael Gallagher, 'Methodological Immaturity in Childhood Research? Thinking through "Participatory Methods"', *Childhood* 15, no. 4 (2008): 499–516.
19 Found, for example, in detailed reflections on the faith of Lucy and Rosie; Phillips, *The Faith of Girls*, chapters 5 and 7.
20 Models inspired by research methods of David Heller, Kalevi Tamminen, David Hay and Rebecca Nye can be found in Phillips, *The Faith of Girls*, 569.
21 This is not to dismiss their chatter as irrelevant: Rebecca Nye, 'Psychological Perspectives on Children's Spirituality' (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1998), 229.
22 As I held myself fully accountable to the church leaders who had entrusted the girls to me, it was also available for their perusal.
23 Space does not permit detailed presentation of each project, so I refer readers to the original research reports. In some examples, there were male and female participants.
24 Anna Lipscomb and Irvine Gersch, 'Using a "Spiritual Listening Tool" to Investigate how Children Describe Spiritual and Philosophical Meaning Making in their Lives', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 17, no. 1 (2012): 5.
25 Ibid., 11. Authors' emphases.
26 Ibid., 2.
27 Catherine Harris *et al.*, '"Big Brother Welcomes You": Exploring Innovative Methods for Research with Children and Young People Outside of the Home and School Environments', *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 5 (2015): 583–599.
28 Jeanette Åkerström and Elinor Brunnberg, 'Young People as Partners in Research: Experiences from an Interactive Research Circle with Adolescent Girls', *Qualitative Research* 13, no. 5 (2002): 528–545.
29 Mary Kellett, 'Small Shoes, Big Steps! Empowering Children as Active Researchers', *American Journal of Community Psychology* 46 (2010): 195–203. There are many examples of child-led research through the CRC. Projects engage girls/boys to the maximum extent as participants and tend primarily to be quantitative. Some examples of qualitative research are to be found among older age groups, but in analysis of their data younger girls/boys can be seen to exert a high level of independent reflection. www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/childrens-research-centre, accessed 3 February 2017.
30 Åkerström and Brunnberg, 'Young People', 531.
31 Ibid., 540.
32 Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Researching 8- to 13-year-olds' Perspectives and their Experience of Religion', in *Researching Children's Perspectives*, ed. Ann Lewis and Geoff Lindsay, (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 143.
33 Harris *et al.*, 'Big Brother, 590.
34 Cathy Ota, 'Stories Told and Lessons Learned: Meeting Beliefs, Values and Community through Narrative and Dialogue', *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 21, no. 2 (2000): 191.
35 Ota, 'Stories Told', 200. Author's emphasis. The group comprised one Sikh and two Muslim girls from different nation communities.
36 Gallacher and Gallagher, 'Methodological Immaturity', 512–513. Authors' emphasis.
37 Ota, 'Stories Told', 197.
38 Project entitled 'Living with Difference in Europe', accessed 3 February 2017, http://livedifference.group.shef.ac.uk.

3 An Ethnographic Method for the Study of Religion in Video Game Environments

Gregory Price Grieve

On the evening of 12 December 2008, I was running late as I arrived at the home of Hope Long, the avatar hosting the Agnostic Buddhist Group (ABG) Friday night open discussion. My encounter with Hope did not happen in the actual world but rather in the game environment of *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003). Launched in 2003, and coming to the focus of mainstream media in late 2007, *Second Life* is an online three-dimensional interactive virtual social space almost entirely built and influenced by the people who use it. Housed in cyberspace, this virtual world can be accessed via the internet from any networked computer on the globe. My study focused on the Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat. Often labeled Western, night-stand, or convert Buddhists, the inhabitants of Hoben typically came from North America, Europe, or other parts of the developed world but could also be found in many cosmopolitan centers of developing nations. Convert Zen Buddhism is a diverse and flexible religion, but its practitioners tend to focus on several facets of the tradition: the therapeutic, the nonhierarchical, the nonviolent, the ecological, and, most importantly, the meditative (Grieve 2016).

When I entered the room, Hope walked over and said, "Clint. love your robes;) [an emoticon for winking]." Hope Long was the founding member of ABG and held much authority in the group, often directing the flow of conversation with just a few well-chosen words, or, in this case, a single emoticon. I was logged on as my research avatar Clint Clavenham, who is a tall, imposing male figure, with a stern face, shaved head, bookish glasses, and full Buddhist monk robes. I looked around and noticed to my surprise that none of the sixteen other avatars were wearing vestments. Instead, they were dressed in fairly typical everyday *Second Life* attire—short sparkly skirts, ball gowns, faded jeans, and t-shirts, and someone was in a Native American costume (Grieve 2015; Grieve and Heston 2011).

This chapter asks the research question: What method can be used to capture the religious meanings users attribute to *Second Life* elements such as avatars, objects, places, groups, and events? *Second Life* is an online virtual playground. Using *Second Life* Zen Buddhism as a case study, this chapter extends Caillois' (2001) and Huizinga's (1950) observations to digital media by outlining an ethnographic method for investigating the relationship between religion and imaginative play in video game environments. The chapter proceeds in four stages. First, it discusses the theoretical concerns of whether *Second Life* is actually a game and

whether the religion found there can be considered authentic. Second, it outlines an ethnographic method for religion in video games environments by describing the concepts of virtual field, participant observation, and thick description, as well as touching briefly upon ethics. Third, the chapter uses *Second Life*'s Zen community as a case study and illustrates the importance of objects, places, avatars, groups, and events, as well as outlining my study's timeline. Finally, the chapter discusses the outcomes of using ethnography to understand play and the sacred in video game environments and to understand the significance of why Hope was winking at me and my virtual robes.

Theoretical Concerns

Using *Second Life* as a case study for sacred and play, however, raises a number of theoretical concerns (Castronova 2005; Cowan 2005; Dibble 1993). As the chapters in this volume make clear, religion exists in video game environments. Yet, is *Second Life* a game environment? If we were to look over the shoulder of a user, no doubt the *Second Life* platform looks like a video game interface. Yet most users are adamant about it not being a video game. On 12 December 2009, I asked the user Mystic Moon and his partner Fae if the platform was a game; they answered in unison, "No." Others answered like the user and self-described Zen gardener, Ashley Lee, who smiled and said that *Second Life* was "no more a game than real life." In the real world "some people play sports on fields, in *Second Life* there are *sims* for games like that." Clearest in theories of gamification (Pelling 2011), if one reduces "game environments" to ludic sports—like arenas, such as Steve Russell's (1962) *SpaceWar!*, in which players collect points and level up, then *Second Life* could not be classified as a game. Yet a purely ludic understanding of a video game environment leaves out the imaginative narrative that is evident in pretend.

Play creates the "magic circle" of a game environment. As Huizinga (1950: 10) writes, "the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds." Game studies has engaged in a long and ultimately empty discussion around whether the essence of a video game's magic circle is ludic or narrative (Frasca 2003). This debate has no doubt influenced how the ethnography of video games has been conducted (cf. Golub 2010; Nardi 2010). A video game's magic circle, however, relies upon both the ludic sports-like quality of collecting points and leveling up, as well as the narrative of imaginative role-play. The imaginative narrative elements of play can be summed up under the concept of "pretend," in which players make believe that something exists that does not. Pretend is not frivolous child's play but is at the center of human culture. The English psychoanalyst Winnicott (1971: 47–50) describes how pretend takes place in the zone between the player and symbols manipulable in the world. Winnicott (1971: 120, 163) argues that pretend is necessary for healthy children, as well as "the abstractions of politics and economics and philosophy and culture . . . this 'third area,' that of cultural experience which is a derivative of play."

Method

One can easily record the ludic element of game environments, the kicking of a ball in football, or the slaying of a dwarf who throws a nasty little axe and vanishes in a cloud of greasy black smoke. Yet people's "imaginative play," the meanings and significances that are afforded by such procedures, is harder to capture. As Huizinga (1950: 17) writes, "It is difficult to describe the process of creative imagination in words that are to the point, though they can hardly be called a true 'explanation.'" When I asked residents to describe *Second Life*, most replied, as a survey respondent did in 2010, "I usually just tell people it's an online social/educational/role-playing game. But that misses the point." To record, analyze, and interpret imaginative play, the method described extends the classic ethnographic notions of the field from the observation of actual collocated, face-to-face physicality to digitally mediated real-time embodied interactions in game environments. Using an avatar, I engaged in a conventional ethnography using participant observation and thick description of *Second Life*'s Zen Buddhist community between November 2007 and October 2011. Concretely, my findings were recorded in shared field notes, screen shots, written documents, and material culture. The method can be conceptualized through research conducted in a virtual online field, the recording of data through participant observation, and the analyzing of it through thick description.

A Virtual Field

The concept of "field" has long proved problematic for ethnography, particularly when describing online environments (Bainbridge 2000; Benedikt 1991; Appadurai 1996). The myth of the ethnographic field as a discreet, bounded geographic locale is proving to be increasingly outdated and untenable as globalization blurs the boundary between "here" and "there" (Fox 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Kohn 1995). Like the magic circle of a playground, an ethnographic field consists of a shard of the social world that is artificially demarcated in time and space. While probably always true, with the rise of digital media, a "field site" can no longer be seen merely as a physical location of face-to-face collocated individuals but rather must be viewed as an intersecting net between people, practices, and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual (Orgad 2008).

Fields proceed not from objective reality but from the interests of the researcher in dialogue with the subject under study. The field of a video game environment could be described as actual, hybrid, online, and virtual. One could focus the field on actual-world game play, such as on eSports, a form of professional gaming in which players compete in large public venues (Lee and Schoenstedt 2011). One could also imagine a hybrid field, which takes into account a community composed of both the actual world and online communication (Amichai-Hamburger 2005; Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011; Jenkins 2006; Satwicz 2006). The interpretation of game environments could also include an online field component, which uses the interactivity of blogs and chatrooms as the focus of study (Mitra and Cohen 1998).

While many ethnographers trace out the connections between online and offline social fields (Hine 2008; Kendal 2002; Markham 1998), my method focuses on an "ethnography of the virtual," which limits the field of video game environments to that in which ethnographers conduct their research in virtual spaces using avatars (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012; Grieve 2016). The mid-1990s saw the first emergence of such virtual studies (Dibble 1998; Grieve 1995; Markham 1998). Virtual environments include worlds such as *Second Life*, as well as early Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and the Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014). I argue that virtual sites constitute a distinct conventional social space, which offers new social fields with differing social positions, lifestyles, values, and dispositions. The difficultly with both virtual field sites and game environments more generally is that their social reality is often doubted, and the communication that takes place there is frequently deemed inauthentic. I found that the virtual data collected in game environments were real and authentic and, while distinct from other digital and actual locations, were not dichotomized from them (Grieve and Heston 2011).

Participant Observation

While an ethnographic study may employ textual analysis, interviews, and surveys, its essential methodological tool is participant observation, which usually employs digital tools and emerges organically from the internet's digital affordances (Boellstorff 2013; Ducheneaut, Yee and Bellotti 2010; Hine 2000). Pioneered in the first half of the twentieth century, by anthropologists such as Bronisław Malinowski (1929, 1961, 1992), E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940), and Margaret Mead (1928), participant observation is a qualitative method in which researchers take part in the daily activities of the group under study and record what they observe. Following the work of Tom Boellstorff (2008) and Julian Dibble (1998), the social space I explored was a virtual site, and I conducted my study almost entirely from within *Second Life* using research avatars. What makes participant observation a scientific research method (as opposed to just "hanging out") is, in an oxymoronic fashion, the fact that the researcher is observing as well as taking part in a group's activities. As one inhabits a group's social world, one also needs to stand back and observe by watching and listening, while taking both physical and mental notes. Observation means logging concrete documentation of social structures, examples of everyday life, and everyday utterances. Concretely, I took "scratch notes" during my time inworld and then after logging off would spend almost as much time writing more detailed descriptions in my field notes, incorporating and describing snapshots, objects, and conversations.

Thick Description

Because it blurs the distinction between the objective language of the scientist and the subjective language of the novelist, however, ethnographic writing—not

to mention virtual ethnographic writing—can be challenging (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1983: 19–35; Miller and Slater 2000; Morningstar and Farmer 1991; Murthy 2008, 2011). Still, while ethnographies can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something manufactured," because they are grounded in the "immersion of the field," ethnography remains a proven method for understanding religious worldviews (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The goal of all this documentation is to create thick description. As the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines the term, a thick description describes both a social practice and also the context in order for that practice to become meaningful to an outsider. Geertz (1973: 5–7) uses the example of a wink. If someone winks it could mean that they are expressing sexual desire or trying to communicate a secret, or they might "actually have been fake-winking, say, to mislead outsiders into imagining there was a conspiracy afoot" (Geertz 1973: 7). Without knowing the context, we reduce the wink to the thin description that the person is merely "rapidly contracting his right eyelid" (Geertz 1973: 7). In a similar fashion, in the context of *Second Life*, one could accurately describe the emoticon ";)" as a semicolon and a bracket, and one could note that it can be found at the end of approximately 0.78% of *Second Life* chat and instant message utterances. Yet such a "thin description" does not explain what this sign means to an insider. In Geertz's (1973: 27) words, it does "not uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subject's acts" and allow us to "construct a system of analysis."

Life Cycle of an Ethnographic Method

A prolonged life cycle is crucial for any ethnographic project because it allows the researchers to become part of the group's everyday routines and to inhabit the insider's world, and it gives them the flexibility to follow alternative hypotheses as they arise during the study. Looking back over my time inworld, the research followed a life cycle similar to that of an avatar—from noobie, to middie, to elder. In the first, or noob stage, I lumbered through the virtual world, and my main aims were identification through exploration, engagement in low-level participant observation, and collection of material culture. The second, or middie, stage lasted from June 2008 through October 2009 and was the most intense period of fieldwork. This period marked a change from exploration and discovery to reporting, and the research became more systematic and routinized. In the middie stage I concentrated on description and engaged in participant observation and the collection of material culture. In June 2009, I ceased participant observation and engaged in a month of inworld open interviews, during which my research team spoke with 69 residents.

The third, or elder, stage lasted from November 2009 to October 2011 and concentrated on confirmation, control, and fact-checking. As the game researcher best known for being the co-creator of *MUD1* (Trubshaw and Bartle 1978), Richard Bartle, writes in *Designing Virtual Worlds*,

> There comes a point when players have advanced so far that they feel they have achieved everything that they set out to achieve. They are no longer

> interested in activities that used to occupy their time: they feel they have 'made it.' The question then arises: What can they do instead?
>
> (Bartle 2004: 451)

By the end of 2009, I felt as if no new data were being generated by my participant observation or inworld exploration. The research thus moved from concentrating on participant observation to structured interviews and surveys. With the key informants, I conducted a series of long, out-of-world, open interviews using Skype or the telephone (n = 13). I also conducted three surveys in 2010. First, with the help of IDC Herzliya's Advanced Reality Lab, I used an animated avatar bot to conduct a broad survey of randomly selected residents that asked about religious affiliation (n = 1227). Second, with the assistance of Kevin Heston, a graduate student, I used the web-based tool SurveyMonkey to administer a 100-question survey to *Second Life* religious practitioners (n = 86); and third, we gave a similar survey to Buddhist residents (n = 108). Finally, between 2011 and 2013, I used the qualitative data analysis program, Atlas.ti, to catalogue and code the team's field notes, 9339 note cards and objects, as well as data mine over 23200 groupchats.

Ethics

Because virtual ethnographers' first and foremost responsibility is to those they study, ethnographic research must consider ethics from the very beginning. For virtual ethnographers, this means that they must never forget that there are real users behind the on-screen avatars. I identified three chief elements of ethical research: informed consent, anonymity, and transparency. First, following the practices of the American Anthropological Association, I understood informed consent as being composed of the communication and comprehension of the study's goals and voluntary participation (American Anthropological Association 2004). The second concern was anonymity, and I felt that each bit of data had to be carefully judged for an appropriate response. In addition to my own moral diligence, both my university's Institutional Review Board document, which monitored my research ethics and was based on a mix of institutional and national guidelines, and *Second Life*'s terms of service required that informants' identities and what they told me be kept confidential (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012). Third, ethics was maintained through transparency, by rejecting such deceptive practices as being a "fly on the wall" and going "undercover" in the guise of an alternative identity.

Case Study

This chapter describes an ethnographic method for the study of religion in video game environments that relies upon the case study of convert Zen Buddhist groups that practiced in the virtual world of *Second Life* between November 2007 and October 2011. Using mouse and keyboard instructions,

one can explore *Second Life*, which includes three-dimensional builds and environmental sounds. One can communicate with other residents via voice and built-in public chat and instant messaging. Residents can buy and make clothes, objects, and buildings as well as buy and rent property. One can conduct businesses using the inworld currency, run nonprofit and educational groups, role-play, and socialize in any number of ways with others (Au 2008).

Users' imaginations are expressed through avatars, objects, places, groups, and events. After logging on through the *Second Life* viewer, users assume an identity by creating an online character called an avatar. In computing, an avatar is the on-screen representation of the user, which can be a three-dimensional model such as in *Second Life*, a two-dimensional icon as used in many chat forums, or a textual description as used in MUDs. Avatars differ from other digital media practices because of bodies. Unlike film that shows bodies, as well as print and radio that tell about bodies, virtual worlds afford a virtual embodiment (Grieve 2015). As such, avatars are not simply game tokens but embody highly personal manifestations of imaginative role-play. In *Second Life*, the default avatar shape is humanoid, and one can choose to be either male or female, but one's avatar can be customized through a graphical user interface to modify gender, body shape, skin, hairstyle, and clothes. The dressing up of avatars played a key role in *Second Life* convert Zen Buddhism. This may come as no surprise, for monk robes have always played a crucial role in Buddhist practice (Faure 1995). Consider the free robes handed out at Hoben by the talented builder Ryusho Ort, which were based on popular Soto So-Fuku robes that he described as "Japanese Soto monk kesa (robes). Also applicable for Chinese and Korean Traditions." Following some 25 centuries of custom, which had traveled from India and been adapted as Buddhism spread through Asia, Ryusho's robes consisted of the "triple robe" style: a lower covering (*antarvasa*) made of a skirt and pants, an upper covering (*uttarasaṇga*) made of a shirt, and an outer robe (*saṃghati*) made of a jacket and flexi attachments.

Avatars interacted with objects, which made *Second Life* different from non-virtual world digital media practices such as the World Wide Web and email. Obviously in the end there really is no difference between a game environment and the web. Both are merely pixels on the screen that are controlled by users through keystrokes and mouse clicks. On the conventional level of lived media practice, however, virtual objects have a "materiality," a term that refers not only to the concrete physical world but also to the fact that objects are pragmatic as well as semantic. Inworld, as the *Second Life* wiki "Object" reads, "an object is either a single prim or a link set (a collection of several linked prims)." In *Second Life* objects can be such things as cars, houses, jewelry, and even less obvious things like hair and clothing. All religious practice requires material culture, and it is through interaction with it that practitioners become entangled with a tradition. Virtual Buddhism does not differ. The central object in Zen Buddhist practice

was virtual meditation cushions, or *zafus*. In real life, a *zafu*, often translated in English as a "sewn seat," is a meditation cushion used for *zazen*, or Zen meditation. A *zafu* is typically round in shape, roughly 15 inches across, and packed tight with *kapok*, a silky fiber obtained from the fruit of the silk-cotton tree. My research revealed that, while modeled after real life, *Second Life* meditation cushions were modified to fit the virtual site. For example, the simple *zafu* was ubiquitous throughout *Second Life*'s Buddhist community and can be traced back to the original Japanese sit pillow, which was created by the well-known builder CrystalShard. CrystalShard initially created the Japanese sit pillow as a freebie, to be included with one of the first items she designed, a sushi table created in 2004. Because the cushion was full perm (i.e., free to copy, modify, and transfer), the Japanese sit pillow has since become a meme, iterations of which have been customized and modified, and can now be found all over *Second Life*.

The interaction of objects and avatars creates places. Game environments differ from flat digital media because they are social spaces that users go and navigate through. On *Second Life*, "places" are the virtual environments built by residents in which avatars dwell and consist of an almost unimaginable variety of venues. Building on *Second Life* allowed residents to express their imaginations. Using the platform's building tools, the *Second Life* Zen community built spiritual places that focused on zendos. In Japanese, *zen-dō* translates as the "place of Zen" and is where *zazen* (sitting meditation) is practiced. Hoben's zendo was at the center of the region and also at the center of the communities practice. It sat in the middle of a forested island that was surrounded by rough seas and modeled on an Asian mountain retreat. During my research, the region's other buildings included three meditation halls, two temples, a monks' retreat, rental cabins, a gift shop, a lounge, and spaces for Tai Chi and concerts, as well as a wisdom publication library, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Awareness Center, and an Addiction Recovery Center.

Groups were at the center of *Second Life*'s Buddhist community. Being inexpensive and hard to disband, they tended to be quite stable and were the backbone of different social clouds. While many residents initially logged on out of curiosity, those who continued to come back were almost always integrated into some type of group. On 1 September 2009, *Second Life*'s Zen Buddhist cloud consisted of five core groups: Bodhi Center, Gekkou Buddhist Group, Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat, Zen Center Retreat, and the Zen Sitting Group. Four of the groups were formed nearly at the same time in late 2007 or early 2008. The remaining group, the Zen Sitting Group, was formed very early in *Second Life*'s history in 2003, and during 2008–2009 had no regular events and was mostly used for cross-posting for groupchat by the other Zen groups.

Second Life revolves around "events," which include activities related to arts, culture, charity, support groups, commerce, discussion, education, games, contests, nightlife, entertainment, pageants, and sports. As the *Second*

Life webpage reads, "Looking for something to do in *Second Life*? Featured Events includes fun and interesting virtual world activities, such as fashion hunts, live music performances, conferences and more" (Second Life n.d.). Events at Hoben included campfire concerts, dharma (spiritual teaching) and book discussions, dharma talks and interviews, and more rarely weddings and memorials. By far the most prevalent and significant practice, however, was silent online meditation, which describes a media practice in which users rested their avatars for twenty to thirty minutes on virtual cushions while they meditated in real life in front of their computer screens. For the vast majority of Hoben community members, silent online meditation was seen as the central focus of their religious practice. As a survey respondent wrote on 8 July 2010, "It takes Practice to understand and engage in [the Buddha's teaching]."

Outcomes

Still a question remains unanswered. Why was the *Second Life* user Hope Long winking at my monk robes and me? One could give a translation, that in online postings ";)" signifies "happily winking," and simulating a real-life wink is often used at the end of utterance to emote irony. One could also differentiate it from other emoticons such as ":-P" (sticking out tongue), and ": (" (unhappy face). One could reference the first digital smiley used in 1982, an article on their humorous use in the 30 March 1881 issue of *Puck*, *The National Telegraphic Review Guide* from April 1957, and the use of the number 73 in Morse Code to signify "love and kisses." One could even give a possible genealogy of ";)" as originating in a speech by Abraham Lincoln (*New York Times* 2009). The historic, quantitative, and (possibly) genealogical definitions of the winking emoticon ";)," however, cannot replace the rich depth of ethnographically contextualized thick description that generates an understanding that analyzes, synthesizes, and evaluates the imaginative play of game environments.

What was the thick description of the virtual robes? The five groups of the Zen Buddhist cloud formed a coherent community that differentiated itself from similar social units. I belonged to many groups that engaged with Buddhism, from the Agnostic Buddhist Group to Zen Temple at Mystical Mastery. At first sight, there was no clear division between the convert Zen groups and the other communities that blended into the Zen Buddhist community, such as the Tibetan, Theravada Buddhist, New Age, and to some degree Pagan and Liberal Christian Community groups. Yet my ethnography uncovered a clear distinction between these and the Zen community that could be observed through ethnography.

For most in *Second Life*, the robes do not have a great significance. For example, when I was not in a Buddhist region, people would enquire—as I was asked by a child avatar one time—"why are you wearing a dress?" However, for *Second Life*'s Buddhist community, the wearing of robes is a very important choice that displays much about how they imagine their Buddhist Practice. For example, as

a member of the Zen Buddhist Cloud said, defending why he did not wear robes, "personally I have all sorts of robes and such but do not wear them because I want to make it as clear as I can that I am not Real Life clergy." As I was later to realize, the Agnostic Buddhist Group tended not to wear robes because it fit into their basic belief that Agnostic Buddhism adopts the most basic tenets of Buddhism and leaves behind centuries of additions from other religions. Hope's wink was a not so subtle communication letting me know that my robes did not belong at the gathering. Through ethnography, one finds that the ";)," while virtual, was a real and effective way to police community standards, and let me as a researcher know when I had stepped outside the accepted practices of the Zen Buddhist community.

Conclusions

Because it captures the religious meanings users attribute to avatars, objects, groups, and events in the virtual world of *Second Life*, this chapter has illustrated that ethnography is an efficient method for recording the imaginative world-building shared by digital playgrounds and the sacred. Understanding such "serious pretend" is necessary, because contemporary society has seen an increase of both video game play and non-institutional forms of religious practice. The Pew Research Center reports that 49% of Americans play video games (Pew Research Center 2015a). At the same time, Pew reports that while traditional religious practice has declined, more and more people are describing themselves as spiritual but not religious (Pew Research Center 2015b). Is this a coincidence? As we have seen, the imagined worlds that emerge from play in digital game environments are similar to those that emerge from religion. By addressing people's imaginative play, the ethnographic method described in this chapter critically examines both games and religion, which as Huizinga (1950: 4) suggests are formally similar because digital media, game environments, and religion "create a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature." Understanding "Homo Ludens Religiosus Digitalis" is not frivolous. As Huizinga argues, by understanding the imaginative element of game environments one can understand the roots of both culture and religion. "The play attitude must have been present before human culture or human speech existed, hence the ground on which personification and imagination work was a datum from the remotest past onward" (Huizinga 1950: 141).

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Chapter 1

Religion

What is it, who gets to decide, and why does it matter?

Whitney A. Bauman, Richard Bohannon, and Kevin J. O'Brien

Max Weber, an early and influential sociologist, started his major treatise "The Sociology of Religion" (1978) by noting that the term "religion" cannot be defined at the beginning of a study, but only after one's research is complete. He then proceeded to write more than five books on the subject, but never achieved enough clarity or completion to reach a definition.

"Religion," it turns out, is a tricky word.

This chapter does not attempt to do what Weber neglected, and will not offer a single, authoritative definition. Instead, it will explore the range of ways in which this tricky word is used by a variety of scholars in order to prepare the way for critical thinking about religion and ecology. We will investigate a series of different approaches – various ways religion is defined, studied, and critiqued – and pay particular attention to the debates and tensions inherent in these choices. The overarching question is: who gets to decide what religion is and who and what gets left out of each approach to religion?

While the focus here is on the ways scholars think about the word "religion," our most important argument is that careful thought about this term and the reality it represents does not just matter in classrooms and books, but is important to many people's lives. Religion has shaped human cultures, and through them has shaped the entire planet on which we live. Religion is deeply and personally important to billions of people on the planet, and religious institutions play instrumental roles in most people's lives in the world today. Religion literally changes the bodies and minds of human beings; through those people and the institutions of which they are a part, religion changes the atmosphere and the landscape of the entire planet. What "religion" is and how it functions in the lives of human beings and in cultural institutions matters deeply.

While religion matters, it is important not to assume too much about it. The term itself has its origins in Latin, and so emerges from western history and carries western baggage. In other words, when we talk about religion we are having a discussion with parameters set in a particular, largely European, cultural context; we should not pretend that all the assumptions made in such a discussion will apply to all cultures. For example, we think of traditions like

Japanese Shinto and Indian Hinduism as "religions" because of a western classification system that has been globalized by economic and cultural colonization. Shinto and Hinduism can helpfully be understood as religions, but we cannot assume that they will fulfill all the expectations westerners bring to that term. Many Hindus do not think of themselves as "Hindu" (itself a western term), but instead primarily affiliate with their geographic region of origin and its ritual traditions. Many practitioners of Shinto are also active Buddhists, and would not understand these two "religions" as demanding an either-or choice.

In light of these complexities and in hopes of developing a view of religion that is not applicable only in the West, the prominent contemporary scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith critiques lists of "world religions," arguing that "It is impossible to escape the suspicion that a world religion is simply a religion like ours … that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history to form it, interact with it, or thwart it" (2004: 191–192). In this chapter and in this book, when we write about religion, we are not only referring to a list of world religions, but rather to components of what has historically been studied under the rubric of "religion." This includes but is not limited to meaning-making practices, institutions, rituals, belief systems, sacred texts, moral norms, taboos, and even philosophical reflection upon religion as a whole. As will be clear the more you reflect on the definitions below, one can find "religion" in many phenomena and institutions that are rarely recognized as religions, one can find religious dimensions in many structures and systems which may not themselves be religions, and one can find practitioners of religions who are resolutely unorthodox in approaching their tradition.

Five definitions of "religion"

Not all scholars of religion have been as reluctant as Max Weber to present a definition, but a quick review of their offerings shows that, as a group, they have reached no more clarity or agreement than he did. What follows is a discussion of five distinct definitions – just a sample of the many available – which emphasize the different choices scholars have made in their approaches to the term. As a group, these definitions clearly demonstrate the complexity of what it is we talk about when we talk about religion, and attention to the differences between them reveals many of the questions and considerations that students of religion must take seriously.

1. Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.

—Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was a Christian theologian who understood religion primarily in terms of that to which believers devote themselves: religion is

about one's "ultimate concern," whatever one is willing to give one's life for, the most important thing in reality, that against which all else is measured (1988 [orig. pub. 1958]: 42). Influenced by his own Lutheran Christian tradition, Tillich believed that there is a truly Ultimate reality, an Ultimate concern that is most worthy of such devotion: the God revealed and incarnate in Jesus Christ. However, his definition sought to be more general than this by acknowledging that non-Christians also experience and are shaped by the mystery of the Ultimate. Tillich assumed that all people have a real experience of something beyond themselves, and this experience is what characterizes religion.

Considered a "theologian of culture," Tillich sought insight not only from Christianity but also from the culture around him, including secular philosophers, artists, and thinkers. Amidst these sources, he sought a single characteristic of religious life common to all people. He wanted to articulate a definition of religion that was not dependent upon any specific tradition, and so he placed his emphasis upon the more philosophical aspects of religion. So, his definition focuses on what people believe most deeply, assuming that all people are religious because all people have an ultimate faith in something.

Tillich's definition is a contribution to the study of religion, but of course it is not a comprehensive account of all religious experience. In his definition, cultural particularities, sacred texts, rituals, and day-to-day choices and practices take a back seat to the singular experience of Ultimate Reality. Tillich's definition helps to reveal common ground between Muslims and Christians, who might both name a supreme and singular deity as their ultimate concern. However, this definition does not shed light on the many differences between these religious traditions and the different cultures and contexts in which they are expressed.

This limitation of Tillich's definition demonstrates the perennial tension between the universal and the particular. To which should we pay primary attention: the universal, ultimate, and eternal; or the particular, everyday life in the material world? Tillich's definition emphasizes the universal, but the third and fifth definitions below will demonstrate more of a focus on the particularities of religion, on the details and expressions of religious traditions in particular contexts.

The distinction between universality and particularity is deeply important in discussions of religion and ecology because it raises a basic question for the scholar: how should one recognize common ground while also noting differences in the ways religious people and institutions respond to environmental degradation? Is it the job of religion and ecology scholars to demonstrate that the major religions universally call for environmental responsibility – that the "ultimate concerns" of most of the world's religious leaders are compatible with environmental ethics? Or is it the job of religion and ecology scholars to parse differences in the ways such calls for environmental responsibility are articulated and justified, to observe and categorize the particularities of religions?

2. Religion is the inmost voice of the human heart that under the yoke of a seemingly finite existence groans and travails in pain.

—D.T. Suzuki

D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), a Japanese Zen Buddhist, defines religion as the universally human response of "groans and travails" in the face of the world's suffering (1963: 24). Like Tillich, Suzuki articulates a definition that is not explicitly tied to any particular tradition, developing a view of religion that crosses cultural and denominational boundaries. Also like Tillich, however, one can detect the influence of the author's religious background: in Suzuki's case, the core Buddhist teaching of *dukkha*, the reality of suffering, is evident. Religion, for Suzuki, is a response to the troubling reality that all things suffer and all things die.

Unlike Tillich, Suzuki never appeals to anything beyond human beings themselves; he sees religion as something created by "the human heart," something internal. Furthermore, this definition takes more than just thinking and ideas seriously and includes the emotional or affective components of religion, which is important for embodied creatures such as human beings. In this definition, there is no "Ultimate" that gives human life purpose or meaning. What is most real and most important for Suzuki is the very natural and common experience of suffering, not the supernatural and distant reality of God or the Holy.

The difference between this approach and Tillich's raises the important distinction between transcendence and immanence, between religious approaches that find meaning and value beyond the world and those that find meaning and value within it. For Suzuki, whose approach is immanent, religion is a direct response to the reality of this world. For Tillich, in contrast, there is something Ultimate beyond the world, something transcendent that deserves human faith.

In general, the more a religion focuses on transcendence, the more it will tend to stress that this world is valuable for the sake of something else, a reality beyond it. The more a religion's focus is on immanence, the more it will tend to stress the value of this world and lives that we are given for their own sake. Obviously, this has great implications for thinking about religion and ecology, because transcendent and immanent belief systems might result in different ways of acting toward the natural world.

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Is an approach like Suzuki's – which views religion as a response to earthly, material realities – the best way to respond to the environmental crisis earth is undergoing? Or is the moral power of an external authority, a distinct and divine Ultimate, a better motivator for reform and transformation?

3. A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them.

—Emile Durkheim

This definition from French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) emphasizes two aspects of religion: (1) it separates some aspects of life from others, marking off "the sacred" from the rest of "profane" reality, and (2) it serves the social function of uniting a community (1995 [orig. pub. 1912]: 46). In the first part of his definition, Durkheim sounds a bit like Tillich, noting that religion is about a special kind of devotion. However, while Tillich thought of "the Ultimate" as something real and outside of human control, Durkheim understands "the sacred" as something human beings create: we make sense of the world by splitting it into the "sacred" and the "profane," and create religious traditions to unite a community around those things that we have declared sacred.

The second part of Durkheim's definition explains *why* human beings create religion: to nurture unity. He often referred to such united communities as "churches," and even wrote, "in history we do not find religion without Church" (Durkheim 1995: 41). This is commonly and justifiably cited as too provincial a definition of religion, skewing the category toward things that look like Christianity (even though Durkheim himself was raised in a Jewish family). Despite the fact that he wrote his most influential work on religion about aboriginal religion in Australia, for instance, Durkheim's study drew not on his own observations, but rather on the notes of another researcher, and his definition looks to many critics like a veiled description of French Christianity. The Australian aborigines he studied would almost certainly never have described their spiritual community as a "church," nor did they have any form of congregational organization like that found in modern Christian communities.

Despite the limits of Durkheim's perspective, however, the particular time and place from which he wrote helped him to notice something important about religion: it plays a social function by uniting people around common beliefs and practices. Europe was in great social upheaval during Durkheim's life, and he had a genuine concern about the disintegration of his society. Religion's role in uniting people was, for Durkheim, a vitally important source of order and community, a way to preserve society. He understood religion as a way to establish and maintain cohesion, and so presents religion as a force to nurture stable societies.

Durkheim's approach is social scientific, seeking to observe and explain religion rather than to find truth within it. Unlike Tillich and Suzuki, Durkheim does not address the substance of religion – the supernatural (Ultimate) or natural (groans and travails) reality to which it responds. Instead, he asks how religions function in societies. In other words, rather than asking a question

about the reality of religion per se (what philosophers might call a metaphysical or an ontological question) he takes religion as a "social fact" (as something people believe in and live by). This distinction raises still more important questions for the study of religion and ecology. Scholars in this field who focus on the substance of religion tend to talk about the incredible potential of religion in response to environmental degradation, identifying underappreciated texts and traditions and calling people to recognize their value and embrace their potential in our time. Other scholars, however, study the actions and beliefs of existing religious practices, observing religion as it currently is rather than arguing for what it should be.

> 4. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.
>
> —Karl Marx

For Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his co-author Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), religion is an ideology, which for them specifically means that it is a mindset born out of oppressive social relations (1964 [orig. pub. 1844]: 42). Religion soothes and comforts the poor masses, but in doing so legitimates the economic imbalances that keep them poor. This is part of Marx's "materialist" perspective on society – that is, he understands religion and other social structures as arising out of material conditions (how we work, where we live, how we get our food). This perspective leaves little room for viewing religion as a catalyst for change.

Unlike Tillich and Suzuki, Marx did not seek to appreciatively clarify the content of religion. While he was like Durkheim insofar as he was concerned about the role religion plays within a society, among our five definitions Marx's is unique in viewing religion as a basically negative phenomenon tied to economic oppression.

Marx's critique of religion and the critique of economic and political structures overarching it have inspired liberationists, feminists, racial minorities, people with disabilities, GLBTQ advocates, and many others who organize for radical social change. A key idea that these movements all share with Marx is a condemnation of hierarchical power structures, a critique of the way contemporary society values the rich over the poor, men over women, whites over people of color, etc. The assumption in Marx's definition is that religion is part of this oppressive hierarchical system; he never considered that religion could be a force opposing oppression. Religion, as Marx understood it, creates the illusion of heart and spirit in a heartless and spiritless society; it gives people hope for an immaterial salvation and so prevents them from seeking real, material change. This critique has become common since Marx's articulation, with many advocates of progress arguing that religion is inherently backwards, an obstacle to positive change.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Marx writes about "the abolition of religion," he opposed some of his radical peers who sought to make religion illegal in a socialist society. Instead, he believed religion would simply fade into irrelevancy over time. If religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature," it will become irrelevant when oppression ends. This prediction of a secular, communist future has not occurred on the time scale Marx seemed to expect, but his critique of religion nevertheless remains vitally important, and raises vital questions for religion and ecology. Is it possible for religion to be a force for positive social change, or is religion inevitably only concerned with spiritual, immaterial matters and completely a product of oppressive and destructive systems? Will a study of religion focused on its relationship to ecological issues demonstrate the validity of Marx's critique, or will it serve as a counterexample?

5. We have to be very careful when we refer to "religion" in public life, since finally it may not be possible to talk about "religion" as a category in this sense. Indeed, depending on which religion we have in mind, the relation to the public will be different.

—Judith Butler

In some ways, it is not fair to call this fifth option a "definition," since what Judith Butler (b. 1956) is doing here is refusing to define religion, raising a question about whether there is any such thing as a consistent category and classification of phenomena that can stably be identified. She calls our attention to the constructed nature of the concept rather than the reality itself, as signaled by the way she puts scare quotes around the word "religion." Butler wrote these words in an essay about "the power of religion in the public sphere," and part of her answer was to insist that there could be no single answer because there is no single thing called "religion." She then went on to answer the question in light of the religious tradition in which she was raised, Judaism, and called out the importance of diversity even within that tradition (Butler 2011: 70).

Butler's most prominent work is not about religion but about gender and sexuality. She has been a leading figure in the queer theory, and has helped to identify ways in which gender and sexual identities are "performative," are enacted in the process of living rather than innate inside us from birth or before. This does not mean that people simply decide they want to be male, female, straight, gay, trans, or anything else; but it does mean that the histories of cultures and societies help to create maleness, femaleness, straightness, gayness, and transsexuality. In other words, cultures and histories create habits for specific ways of becoming that help to perform our bodies.

In her comments on religion, Butler notes that the same is true about religious identity: there is no such thing as an unchanging category of "religion," or even "Judaism." Instead, Judaism is performed by Jewish people, negotiated and changed over time in dialogue with cultural and social conditions. Similarly,

when scholars talk about religion, they negotiate and change what they mean over time in dialogue with their cultural social and conditions. So, in a way Butler's refusal to define religion is a definition, labeling "religion" as the adaptive, culturally-specific performative expression of religious people and those who study them. Her concern is not so much with the reality of religion's content, but rather with how religious meanings and ideas materialize in the world around us.

Butler's arguments about religion tend to focus on the importance of debate and adaptation. When Pope Benedict insisted that gender is divinely-ordained and that God makes human beings as "male" and "female," Butler responded by calling on Catholics and scholars of religion to take the argument seriously but also pose the hardest questions they could to show that more than one interpretation is possible. She was certain that all doctrine inevitably evolves as religion is performed in a changing world (Butler 2009: 287–289). For Butler, all authority – the authority of someone who tells you what it means to be "normal" in your sexuality, the authority of a pope who seeks to speak on behalf of an entire tradition, and the authority of anyone who tells you what "religion" means – should be questioned.

More than the other definitions above, Butler stresses that religion's place in individual lives and social systems changes over time, that whatever religion is, it is something different than it used to be and will be something different in the future. Perhaps the most important question is: Who is seeking to define religion for us, and why? This makes power dynamics explicit: Who decides which religious ideas, symbols, and trends are central? Who decides when and how they are changed?

Such questions are vital to religion and ecology. Scholars in this field must continually ask: are existing religious traditions flexible enough to deal with contemporary environmental and social crises, or do we need new symbolic systems, new religious perspectives? If something new is necessary, who has the authority and the power to develop it? How will religious symbols change and evolve in an era of environmental degradation?

1B

The definitions of Tillich, Suzuki, Durkheim, Marx, and Butler not only shed light on the complexity of religion, but also on the important questions a critical perspective on the term raises for the project of this book: How should religion and ecology balance universality and particularity? Transcendence and immanence? Substantive and descriptive views? Can religions be a force for positive social change, or are they inherently problematic? How does religious change happen, and how should it happen?

Why defining religion matters

It may be tempting to argue that if five intelligent and insightful thinkers could have such divergent definitions of "religion," the term has become meaningless – it can apparently be defined any way one wants. However, Jonathan Z. Smith draws a hopeful conclusion from this reality: what we learn from the diversity of definitions is that religion *can* be defined (2004). The job of the student or researcher is to choose which definition will be most fruitful for his or her particular project with an awareness of how much is at stake in this choice.

Definitions of religion matter to scholars of religion because they work as filters through which we see things: if you believe that all religions are about an "ultimate concern," as did Tillich, or that they demarcate "the sacred," as did Durkheim, then you will start asking religious people what they consider "sacred" or most worthy of concern, and you will likely assume that this is central to their religious experience. If you assume that religion is a response to suffering – as do both Marx and Suzuki, in different ways – then you will look at any spiritual system to see how it addresses, mitigates, or disguises the key sources of suffering in human life. If you assume that religions shape identities and bodies differently throughout time and within cultures – as does Butler – then you will be more concerned with assessing how particular religious meanings and values impact different peoples, places, and things. Different definitions highlight different aspects of religion.

To provide an example, let's consider the question of whether religion is most likely to be a problematic or a promising force in developing a response to environmental degradation. If we adopt Marx's perspective and view religion as a coping mechanism that inevitably solidifies the status quo, we will be skeptical that religious groups could ever respond constructively to environmental crises. According to Marx's definition, religion is fundamentally opposed to any real social change, and so people concerned with environmental degradation would seek to understand and study religion only as part of the problem to be solved.

Alternatively, if we follow thinkers like Tillich and Suzuki in seeing religion as a universal and healthy human response to reality, then it is much easier to imagine faith communities and commitments playing a constructive role in addressing environmental challenges. Tillich believed that life only has meaning when it is centered on an "ultimate concern," that this is a fundamental and inevitable part of being human. So, from a Tillichian perspective it would be counterproductive to try to address the problem of environmental degradation without engaging it religiously. Suzuki offers an even clearer case, and would see the perils of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as clear examples of the "groans and travails" that characterize human life. According to Suzuki's definition, any authentically human response to those challenges is itself an expression of religion, and so it is impossible to imagine an

environmentalism that it is not in some sense religious. From these perspectives, there is a clear, even necessary role that religion must play in responding to environmental degradation.

Finally, if we adopt Butler's perspective, then we would likely refuse to answer the question of whether religion is problematic or promising, and instead ask more questions. Which religion are we talking about, and for whom is it problematic or promising? Religion plays different roles in the lives of different people, and so any answer to the basic question assumes a problematically broad generalization. This gets even more complicated when we note that religion is also about the authority of human beings over other creatures, and that we should also question the performativity that shapes animal and earth identities as well as those of human beings. Belief systems value certain creatures and devalue others – many Hindus respect cows as a symbol of life because of their religious traditions, many Muslims and Jews refrain from eating pork because of their religious laws. How do such beliefs and practices reshape human relationships to the world, and whose interests do they serve in a world of environmental degradation? For Butler, the questions are always worth asking.

It gets even more interesting when we identify adaptations and combinations of the definitions. Some religion scholars apply this Marxist understanding of social conflict to environmental issues – noting that our current social structures value humans over the rest of the natural world in the same way as the rich are valued over the poor – but also agree with Tillich that there is a transcendent force that calls religious people to improve their institutions and make the world a better place. Such prophetic, liberationist approaches present religion as more than simply an opiate; they hope that religion can become "the heart of a heartless world" in a way that nurtures action rather than complacency. In this view, religion can speak for the poorest of the earth and, in some cases, the earth itself, and can call for radical change. These perspectives see religion as potentially a force that can do the subversive work Judith Butler calls for: questioning ideologies, challenging systems of injustice, and deconstructing the ways in which humans dominate the rest of the natural world.

Another question posed by these definitions concerns what counts as a "religion." If we assume with Durkheim that religion is a unifying social force centered around demarcating the "sacred" from the profane, then we will start looking for organized groups of people who clearly distinguish one category of things as special and holy and separate from the rest of the world. When seeking out religious responses to environmental degradation, we will likely look to organized structures like the Roman Catholic Church, the Religious Society of Friends, the Rabbinical Assembly, or the World Union for Progressive Judaism. These are important groups, and it is valuable to research how each of these institutions has developed a response to environmental degradation in light of what their leaders consider most sacred. However, not

all religious activities are reflected in such organizational structures. The diversity of Native American spiritualities, Hindu communities, and Christian house churches, for instance, are not well represented in institutional structures, and yet each demonstrates interesting and important religious responses to environmental degradation.

Tillich and Suzuki's more inclusive definitions of religion offer a helpful corrective, freeing us to see religion in *any* attempt to make meaning or respond to suffering. It is easy to see how many communities – some formally organized and others not – could be recognized as "religious" from these perspectives, and so the field of religion and ecology becomes much broader. Indeed, these definitions can be used to characterize the environmental movement itself as religious. When they respond to the suffering of polar bears and polluted neighborhoods, or appeal to the integrity and beauty of "Mother Earth," environmentalists can be understood to be acting religiously. The potential downside of this approach is that when religion is defined so broadly, it is possible to see *anything* as religious, which might pose the challenge of expanding religion and ecology beyond a manageable scope.

1C

Is environmentalism religious? According to which definitions might this claim make sense, and which definitions preclude it? What difference might it make to the goals and cause of environmentalism to see this movement as religious?

Studying religion inside and out

Scholars argue not just about what religion is, but also about how to study it. The most common question is whether we should think and teach about religion primarily from within or outside of religious communities. At its most basic, the question might be phrased this way: Do you place more trust in a scholar of religion working from a personal faith, or one working from a scholarly approach that is not overtly influenced by particular faith commitments?

A comparison to other disciplines might help to clarify – if not answer – this question: Would you trust a professor of criminology more or less if you knew she had herself committed a crime, or worked as a police officer, or served time in jail? Would you value the insights of a professor of elementary education more or less if you knew he had studied educational theory for years but had never himself taught elementary-age students? Would you rather learn from an economics professor who had spent years in the financial

industry, or one who had spent that time in the academy developing tools with which to analyze that industry? The basic question is: does more insight come from being inside or outside the object of our study?

In the simplest terms, scholars who work from inside a religious tradition, assuming its importance and working to carry on the traditions of a faith, practice "theology." Scholars who view religion from the outside, applying objective or comparative tools to religious traditions without assuming that they contain special truth, practice "religious studies." Religious studies is about understanding the relationship between religion and society and making sense of the ways religious people organize themselves. By contrast, theologians frequently prioritize the traditions, practices, and texts of a community; they understand religion from within the experience of a particular faith.

Some theologians will often claim that religion cannot be understood unless one is personally invested and participating in it, and will note that it insults and marginalizes believers and practitioners to believe that religion can be understood and categorized *without* the insights that come from commitment to a faith community. Some scholars of religious studies, on the other hand, will frequently claim that the critical distance of an outsider is vital, and argue that theology gives too much authority and power to a single tradition, privileging the view of religion adopted by one community rather than appreciating religion as a diverse global reality. These two approaches reflect important, and sometimes heated, disagreements about where and how it is *legitimate* to study religion.

ID

Is scholarship on religion more reliable if it emerges from religious people, or if it emerges from an academic study of such people that does not assume the validity of their beliefs and claims?

In the United States, public universities and secular private colleges tend to exclusively teach religious studies, assuming no validity for any particular tradition and approaching religion as a social phenomenon. Religiously affiliated private colleges and universities, on the other hand, tend to also teach theology, working from within a particular faith community, assuming that there is wisdom in the texts and traditions of that community. Some evangelical Christian colleges, interestingly, teach "Bible" courses rather than theology because of a core assumption everything of crucial importance can be learned directly from the Christian Bible. In the terms we have introduced, however, this emphasis on scripture is clearly "theological" in that it is confessional, studying religion based on the internal standards and categories of a tradition which asserts that its scriptures are divinely inspired.

Having drawn the distinction between religious studies and theology, it is important to note that theologians can do religious studies and scholars of religious studies can do theology. Moreover, some theologians work *outside* of specific religious traditions and/or use sources from a variety of traditions: a Hindu scholar might understand her own tradition better by utilizing theories derived from studies of Islam. And some religious studies scholars work *within* tradition: a sociologist who studies the growth and development of evangelical Christianity may himself be a member of an evangelical church.

As will become increasingly clear throughout this book, the distinction between "theology" and "religious studies" is too simple: many scholars cross between these categories, and many approaches to religion do not fit well into either. For example, Divinity Schools, such as are found at Yale, Harvard, and Vanderbilt, train ministers and priests while also offering degrees and courses in religious studies. Furthermore, referring to insider perspectives on religion as "theological" shows a bias toward monotheistic, western religions, because theology is traditionally understood as thought about God. It is, however, possible to work from inside a religion without an emphasis on God or gods. Many Buddhists, for example, believe that the question of divinity is irrelevant or secondary to their religious faith. Thus, a Buddhist scholar might be reluctant to label herself "theological" even though she studies her tradition from the inside. Clearly, the distinction between religious studies and theology is not perfect.

However limited it may be, though, this distinction illustrates a real difference in how religion is taught and thought about by many scholars and students today, a difference that has important implications within the field of religion and ecology. Many scholars in this field have worked in a "theological" context, seeking to understand and represent a particular tradition in order to identify and encourage its environmentally friendly aspects. For example, the Islamic anthropologist and philosopher Nawal Ammar works from within her tradition to offer "A Muslim Response to the Ecological Crisis," deriving a set of principles from the Qur'an and Islamic history to call for a more careful and more just distribution and use of earth's resources. Ammar highlights the Arabic virtue of *hay'a*, a "respect and reverence" that "reflects balance, honorable manners, and protection of God's glory including his creatures and other creation" (2004: 287). Her discussion of an environmental ethics based on *hay'a* is an articulation of religious duty to the environmental from *within* a religious tradition, clearly a theological argument.

Other religion and ecology scholars specialize in religious studies, identifying and observing trends in religious communities rather than advocating particular approaches from within. For instance, Richard Foltz is a prominent scholar in the field who has, like Nawal Ammar, paid careful attention to how Muslims respond to environmental degradation. Foltz edited the volumes *Islam and Ecology* (2003) and *Environmentalism in the Muslim World* (2005), and so has helped to define the place of Islam in the field of religion and

ecology. However, Foltz's authority for doing this work does not come from his own religious affiliation, but instead from his scholarship as an historian of comparative religion. He studies Islam from the outside, and has also published analyses of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Mormonism. This is the work of religious studies, which allows for more easy comparison between traditions and makes it possible to attend to the wide range of ways to be religious in our world rather than speaking exclusively from one single tradition.

Still other scholars in religion and ecology do theology but do not stress their affiliation with a historical religious tradition. Instead, they may find their spiritual truth in environmentalism itself and seek to articulate new meanings and values based upon the scientific view of the world. The late Thomas Berry sought to articulate a form of religious naturalism, based upon his understanding of the "Story of the Universe." He thought the 14.5 billion year-long process of universal expansion and the 4.5 billion year-long process of geo-evolution provided the grounds for a new type of ecologically oriented spirituality (Berry 2009). He uses the "story" of evolution and the emergence of life's diversity as a new context for understanding meaning and value, a new kind of religion. His theology develops a new kind of tradition, a religious naturalism, which responds to environmental degradation by deriving spiritual truth in conversation with contemporary science.

The field of religion and ecology is better off because it includes all of these scholars, and because it includes a wide range of outsiders and insiders studying a wide range of religious traditions. However, no guide to this field can ignore that each scholar is making important choices about how much they will identify with and work within the traditions they study and how much they will value a critical distance that allows for more objectivity and comparison.

Conclusion

Debates about how to study religion matter because it matters how – and that – we seek to understand religion. Religion has helped to shape the economic, legal, cultural, and moral systems under which all people live. In most if not all societies, religion plays a central role in transmitting information and traditions from generation to generation. To pretend that religion doesn't matter in and to the world would be to ignore a huge part of human histories and experiences.

As this chapter has made clear, religion can mean many different things. But however we understand and frame it, the religious world is a major force in shaping how we interact with our environment, and it is continually being reshaped by new encounters with the non-human world. Amidst all the disagreements, this idea unites all the definitions discussed here, it unites scholars of religion and ecology, and it unites the contributors to this book. However we define and debate it, religion matters.

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1.6
RESEARCH ETHICS

Frederick Bird and Laurie Lamoureux Scholes

Chapter summary

- This chapter offers researchers in religious studies practical advice for negotiating the ethical waters of research practices.
- The act of research requires that researchers ought to respect the basic dignity of their subjects, communicate honestly and objectively with their subjects and audiences, and exercise responsibly the diverse ethical judgements we inevitably make within all stages of the research process.
- In so far as our research involves interactions with living persons, our investigations also need to comply with an additional set of regulated ethical obligations with respect to risk-benefits analysis, informed consent, freedom to discontinue and confidentiality.

> Research is first and foremost a moral activity.
>
> *(Nina Hallowell* et al. *2005: 148)*

Introduction

As scholars within the field of religious studies we are inherently engaged in the study of the religious life of other people. Whether we focus our research on studies of architecture or texts, on organizations or rituals, historical or contemporary, our research is not just an exercise in literary criticism, symbolic analysis, social deconstruction or archaeological reconstruction. It is also an engagement with the people who have and do express their religious lives using these texts, actions and artifacts. As researchers, then, we gather, analyze, organize, interpret, translate, re-present and communicate information about religions. In the process we inevitably involve ourselves in several overlapping conversations—whether actual, assumed, implied or imagined—with the subjects of our research and with various audiences which may include other researchers, our colleagues, critics, assistants, project sponsors, people in positions of authority, policy-makers, media and interest groups, as well as the subjects themselves. These conversations require our ongoing attention to ensure ethical integrity in both our treatment of those we study and in our efforts to produce and disseminate knowledge about their religious life.

Generally, the practice of ethics involves efforts by humans to guide human conduct in relation to normative standards and values, variously identified in relation to outcomes, dispositions and modes of acting. With respect to research in religious studies, there are at present no widely recognized normative standards or guidelines, no professional code of ethics to set the standard for both how we should engage in our investigations and how we should communicate what we learn in the process. The absence of a professional code in part reflects the fact that those who engage in religious studies do so with quite different disciplinary approaches—for example, as historians, field researchers, psychologists, literary critics, economists, or philosophers. Scholars of religion also approach their studies from quite dissimilar orientations—as secular scholars, committed members of varied religious groups, and/or former members. Yet, within the diverse communities of scholars involved in religious research, we think that there are several basic principles for the practise of ethics with respect to religious research that can, and for the most part already are, held in common.

It is important to recognize that ethical issues/dilemmas arise in religious studies research in at least three different ways. First, sometimes ethical issues emerge because someone—researchers or the subjects—are clearly acting in violation of basic ethical or legal standards. For example, evidence is being blatantly misrepresented; works are being knowingly plagiarized; coercion or manipulation is possibly being practised on some group members; relevant information is being suppressed; private, confidential information is being exposed without permission; consent to undertake research has been manipulated. These are examples of **ethical wrongs**. Many more examples could be cited. It is useful to warn people against these prohibited activities, to identify any instances that might occur, and to prevent them from recurring, as far as possible. Most universities and professional associations have established complaint and due process procedures to confidentially review allegations of these kinds of wrongs and to determine appropriate responses, whether in the form of discipline, censure or referral to fitting public agencies. If we become aware that wrongs are being committed in the groups we are studying—such as what seems like the abuse of children or the use of manipulative recruitment practices—then we are obligated to determine whether relevant legal standards may be being violated and whether and how we might be called on to report on these activities. In some cases the discovery of what looks like wrongs may occasion serious dilemmas as we puzzle over what responses seem appropriate.

Second, many more ethical issues present themselves not as overt wrongs but as shortfalls from standards of excellence expressed either as fundamental moral principles or as institutional guidelines. For example, subjects are mostly but not fully informed. Relevant data is partially overlooked. Moral evaluations and/or religious views may cause researchers to discount important information too quickly. Researchers begin to reify the categories they are using for analysis; that is, they treat their concepts as more real than the people and activities they are studying. Observers too quickly dismiss the accounts of subjects as being either self-serving tales, echoed versions of official group stories, or simply fanciful expressions. All of these examples represent probable instances of **moral shortfalls**. Generally, more appropriate ethical behavior is typically fostered in these kinds of cases through mentoring, collegial criticism and by motivating people to seek more assistance/feedback and to exert greater caution.

Third, ethical issues with respect to research sometimes present themselves as genuine **ethical dilemmas** or debates about which it is possible to arrive at more than one ethically justified position. Consider the following questions: Is it acceptable or not to receive research

funding from an organization associated with the group we intend to investigate? To what extent is it useful and legitimate to allow our studies of scriptures to be informed by theological assumptions? How much credence should we give to the accounts of religious movements provided by former members? Why have sociologists tended to provide sympathetic accounts of contemporary new religious movements and psychologists have in turn tended to provide much more critical accounts? When is it acceptable to pay informants for their time to be interviewed or complete questionnaires and survey forms? As we investigate a particular religious group, knowing that however we choose to focus we will overlook possibly relevant information, to what extent should we pay attention to broad characteristics, interesting examples, the accounts of articulate informants, and/or hearsay information? There are no inherently right or wrong answers to these kinds of questions. Research can and will be guided by diverse values and interests. Yet the public character of our reports and studies means that at the very least we invite diverse others to comment, to raise questions and to point out what they consider to be imbalanced in the way we have undertaken, analyzed and reported on our research.

Box 1.6.1 Ethical concerns in research

- Ethical wrongs
- Moral shortfalls
- Ethical dilemmas

In this chapter we explore further examples of each of the above ethical issues/dilemmas in relation to two different yet equally important kinds of ethical standards applicable to research in religion, whether in the field or in the library. First, we discuss three general guiding principles that are fundamental to all stages of the research process—before, during and after engagement with our research subjects. They in part define the practice of research as a profession, a moral activity with clear responsibilities and obligations. They act as a continual reminder that it is the ways in which we relate to and treat others that make our research ethical. Second, we examine the more precise set of ethical requirements regulated by formal research review boards. These more precise rules refer to the minimal obligations that must be met to receive formal approvals from institutional ethical reviews for research projects involving human subjects. While these rules must be followed by those undertaking these kinds of contemporary investigations, the considerations associated with these rules remain relevant to research in religious studies in general.

It is important to note that while ethical standards often appear by themselves quite obviously as overt ethical duties, obligations and values, many times the norms and values that shape the expectations of how we should act responsibly as researchers are also expressed by and integrated with standards communicated by common sense, methodological procedures and rules of etiquette. This is especially true with regards to the ethical standards with respect to research. Standards such as those that call for us to respect the dignity and privacy of our subjects or call for us to reliably reference the sources of our information are frequently communicated at the same time by methodological guidelines, legal stipulations, as well as ethical expectations. Correspondingly, as we review the basic ethical principles governing research ethics, we will at times echo normative expectations also expressed by those concerned with epistemological and methodological standards.[1]

Part one: Basic guiding ethical principles

In approaching any research project there are three general and fundamental ethical principles that guide how religious research ought to be done. These are as follows: first, researchers ought to respect and appreciate the dignity and integrity of our subjects; second, researchers ought to communicate honestly and objectively to our subjects and audiences who, depending on the character of our investigations, may be quite restricted or broad, include diverse publics and/or be members of our own religious communities; and third, researchers ought to exercise our judgements responsibly as we gather, analyze and evaluate our data, and report on our research.[2]

Unlike regulated ethical protocols, these fundamental principles primarily serve not as restraints to limit questionable research practices—though they do—but as grounds that identify the basic purposes of research. The ethical good of research is integrated with the efforts undertaken out of respect, interest and appreciation of the diverse others who are the subjects of our studies to locate new information, to identify significance, to see patterns and to communicate our accounts publicly as part of ongoing conversations with subjects and audiences—colleagues, critics, media, policy-makers, interest groups, etc. These principles remind us to exercise due caution so that we do not overlook people who are not as well represented in written sources and official accounts. We are cautioned as well not to unwittingly conflate our moral evaluations with our efforts to explain and identify representative information and cautioned not to communicate our results only to those likely to agree with us. These principles remind us that in all phases of the research process we are engaged in overlapping conversations—both real and imagined—with subjects and audiences and that we need to attend to what others communicate, directly and indirectly.[3]

Box 1.6.2 Three general ethical principles of religious research

- Respecting the dignity and integrity of others
- Communicating honestly and objectively with our subjects and audiences
- Responsibly exercising judgement

Respecting the dignity and integrity of others

Out of respect for the dignity of others, we must begin our studies taking very seriously how the others we are studying account for their symbols, rituals, texts and behaviors. That is, where such accounts are at all relevant, they must not simply be disregarded. Our initial mandate is to be attentive to these others as others, not subsuming them within our frames of reference but instead paying attention to them in relation to the expressions, accounts and stories they voice and narrate. We are called upon to describe their behavior in relation to the accounts they give of their behavior (Weber 1978: 4–5). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz accordingly cautions researchers: 'The ethnographer does not, and in my opinion cannot perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive "with"—or "by means of" or "through"—that is, the expressions, rituals, and artifacts that function as their means of communication' (Geertz 1983: 58).

As we engage in actual or imaginary conversations with our subjects, we may well find it difficult to comprehend their meanings. We may in fact find these others to be quite other,

different, foreign and strange. In a way, this is a helpful initial response because it functions to warn us not to approach these others—especially predecessors in traditions with which we may now closely identify—without due respect for their uniqueness and the ways in which they may well differ from us (Barth 1957).

The sociologist Robert Bellah compellingly argued for this kind of orientation for studies of religion in an essay in which he criticized various social scientific accounts of religion that reduced religion to certain kinds of social functions. Even while he called attention to their immense contributions to understanding the central social role of religions in human societies, Bellah noted the way Durkheim largely viewed religions in terms of their impact on social cohesion and Weber largely analyzed religions in terms of the ways they shaped practical social ethics. Proposing an approach he referred to as 'symbolic realism', Bellah argued that religions ought to be analyzed on their own terms (Bellah 1970; Robbins *et al.* 1973; Anthony *et al.* 1974). In practical terms, this proposal does not mean that religions must be examined solely in terms of their own belief systems, but it does imply that researchers must attempt to cultivate an appreciative understanding of how religions present themselves as a fundamental feature of the social reality that we are seeking to analyze and explain.[4]

One way of guarding against overly superficial approaches to the study of religion is to recognize that religions as social realities are multidimensional. They include beliefs, rituals, social organizations, personal histories, art works, buildings, sentiments and memories. Although in our investigations we may appropriately focus on only particular aspects of this much larger whole, it is well to keep in mind not only that we are in the process looking at a part of the religious life in which several aspects play their role but also that religion itself may play a larger or smaller role in the lives of the people we are studying.

We are especially called to pay attention to these others and how they choose to express themselves, both those whose communications are easily accessed and those whose communications may only be accessed through reasonable inferences. Researchers are especially reminded that we are strangers often but not always self-invited to learn from our hosts. Even when these others communicate in ways that seem incomprehensible, researchers are called upon to exercise their abilities to listen, infer, imagine, suggest and question in order to gain a sense of what the others are communicating and by what means they do so.

In practical terms, to effectively navigate the rich multi-dimensional identities of our research subjects, researchers may need to invest significant time in language training, in cultural immersion and in studying histories of the religious tradition. Decent language skills provide the necessary foundation for communicating our research objectives and, more importantly, for listening effectively, thus leading to a deeper understanding of subtle variations in thought expressed in the field. We are well-cautioned not to be too smug in our skills as even the most proficient linguist may misinterpret local idioms when first heard, a situation that can, at a minimum, lead to embarrassment for all parties, or more seriously contribute to inaccurate representations (see Korum 2001).

Awareness of cultural and religious norms allows us to respect various etiquette and reciprocity protocols: whether to dress up or down, how we respond to acts of hospitality and how best to show our appreciation to the community. For example, over the years June McDaniel has, in the name of research, found herself in several odd situations. Her studies often take her into the field in India. During one trip, the only way she could collect an interview from a hefty *pisaca tantrika* was to 'be his mother. I had to feed him rice with my hand while he sat on my lap' (McDaniel 2001: 81). While the experience was odd, her informant was thrilled that she performed the requested act as it demonstrated her acceptance of the social position and authority of the *pisaca tantrika* while at the same time protecting her from

potentially dangerous magic, given her new role as his mother (McDaniel 2001: 81). In the same article, McDaniel discussed the difficulties of meeting the ethic of reciprocity particularly in regard to thanking her assistants and informants for their work. Although she was quite willing to offer cash payments to her mostly impoverished informants as a token of appreciation for their time, many saw the gesture as an offence, the establishment of a hierarchical relationship of boss and slave. Her solution was to instead offer a donation to the local temple, shrine or deity for *puja* (McDaniel 2001: 80). Whether studying religious communities in our local community or in remote locations around the world, such actions go far in building trust, diminishing misunderstandings and demonstrating our respect for the dignity of others.

Typically, as we study the religious life of others, we undertake our research by contacting and questioning particular others who are accessible for our investigations, whether these be by means of interviews or by examining texts and artifacts. We are well cautioned to inquire whether our contacts (sources) are representative of the larger communities and ways of life we are hoping to study, for it is possible that these contacts may well not adequately represent the religious life of the larger group. For example, many of the written accounts we use to engage in historical studies of the religious life of people from our own or other cultures were written by and for literate, upper-class males. These accounts may not well represent the views and experiences of women, illiterate persons and lower-class groups. The written texts and accounts researchers typically use may well provide unrepresentative expressions of the religious life of people as they were in fact lived (Douglas and Ney 1998; Bird 1997). Likewise, when in the field, we need to take care in selecting our gatekeepers, translators and informants to ensure we have access to a diverse sample. If we are not collecting different points of view, our samples may not be balanced or large enough. This is not to suggest that it is unethical to have a bias. Biases of some sort are practically inevitable. However, researchers should reflect on the limitations associated with the sources of information they choose to use (even when no other sources seem to exist).

Out of respect for the dignity and integrity of others and how they understand themselves, we also need to be circumspect in the labels we use to identify others and their social locations. In our investigations we often use social science terms, like sect, cult, members and apostate, as well as religious names, like Christian, Hindu, fundamentalist or liberal, to identify particular people. While often subjects use these terms to self-identify, they also often use qualifiers to note how closely or loosely they think these terms apply (Glock and Stark 1967). In some cases subjects may be offended by such categorization and request a retraction or at least clarification. For example, in the 2007 issue of *Religion*, Moojan Momen published an article about apostates within the Baha'i tradition in which several of those portrayed took issue with the author. In this case the journal editors provided space in the 2008 issue for the aggrieved to respond to what they perceived as inaccurate representation (Stausberg 2008). Of course, not all research subjects have access to academic journals or alternative forums to respond to their perceived misrepresentation. Instead, in respect of the other, it is scholars' responsibility to treat these terms heuristically, and not as determinant classifications as with chemical elements or biological types.

Out of respect for the dignity and integrity of our subjects, we are especially called upon to protect their privacy. If they wish their identities to remain unknown and if they ask us not to divulge confidences, then we must respect their wishes, or we will be using them and their information as a means to our own ends. We are also called upon to securely protect confidential information so that it does not end up being used or exploited by others. If, on the other hand, subjects wish to be cited, then we must take care that we accurately and reliably

cite them so that the statements they choose to make do not appear in forms that communicate quite different meanings.

In addition to these general guidelines regarding the respect and appreciative interest we owe those whose lives we are directly or indirectly studying, there are at least two minimal obligations we must also honour in so far as we have direct contact with these others.

First, recognizing others as autonomous agents, we are obligated to fully and clearly inform them with respect to our research and allow them the opportunity voluntarily to choose whether or not to participate. This obligation also asks that special care be taken in research with persons of diminished autonomy or deemed members of vulnerable groups such as children, the legally incompetent, indigenous peoples, refugees, the incarcerated or victims of violence. Typically, where subjects are appropriately not recognized as fully competent adults, then permission must be sought from guardians in order to conduct research with these persons. Within religious studies we might add, to the list of those for whom special care and attention needs to be exercised, marginalized members of religious communities, including women within conservative patriarchal traditions, and members of persecuted minority religious communities.

Ordinarily, it is expected that we will provide informants and subjects with a written description of the research and ask them to signify their consent in writing. Both researchers and subjects will then possess written statements clearly specifying the research process and any attendant risks. The basic assumption here is that, out of respect for the other, no one should be compelled to be the subject of research. It is worth noting that researchers often have to gain consent both from the organizations that are the site of our investigations as well from the individuals whom we are directly interviewing. Alternatively, our research may take us to settings in which it is preferred that consent be solicited and given in oral instead of written form. Oral consent is typically used in anthropological field research where subjects may well not be literate and/or where the written consent forms often aggravate undue suspicions. In these settings, as researchers it is expected that we fully and clearly describe our research and how it will affect those involved, solicit verbal consent, and make and keep written or recorded records of these verbal agreements. Lastly, because subjects freely consent to participate in research processes, then in principle they also have a right later to choose to discontinue their participation. Rarely do subjects exercise this right, yet nevertheless this remains a basic tenet of the consent process because it signals the voluntary character of the participation by subjects and informants. This is particularly important for long-term fieldwork research where relationships with research subjects can evolve into perceived and/or real friendships where the researcher/subject lines can blur (McDaniel 2001; Palmer 2001).

Second, in so far as research processes either expose others to more than ordinary risks or bring risky situations to light, then as researchers we are obligated to find adequate and appropriate means of managing or responding to these risks. Rarely does religious research expose others to physical or financial risks. However, investigations of religious phenomena can directly or indirectly occasion heightened reputational risks for those we are studying. They may feel that our analyses and interpretations raise questions about the character of their activities and motives. How we handle such cases may not be simple. We will explore these kinds of situations when further along we discuss the importance of exercising judgement responsibly. At this point, it is important to observe that in so far as we have voluntarily gained the consent from others to pursue research involving them, then we have some responsibility to minimize added risks they may face as a result of our research or to manage those risks in ways that do not force them to confront unwarranted public attacks. Nonetheless, there are clear limits in these settings. If, as a result of our investigations, we unearth evidence

of intentional fraud or physical or psychological abuse of religious adherents, then, out of respect for the dignity and integrity of others, we are also correspondingly called upon to find ways of bringing appropriate attention to these problems.

Box 1.6.3 Respecting the dignity and integrity of others

- Take seriously how the others we study account for their symbols, rituals, texts and behaviors
- Religions ought to be analyzed on their own terms
- Recognize that religions as social realities are multidimensional
- Pay attention to these others and how they choose to express themselves
- Researchers may need to invest significant time in language training, cultural immersion and studying histories of the religious tradition
- Respect etiquette and reciprocity protocols
- Ensure our contacts (sources) are representative of the larger communities and ways of life we are hoping to study
- Be circumspect in the labels we use to identity others and their social locations

Additional obligations when research involves direct contact with research subjects

- Informed consent
- Adequate and appropriate responses to perceived risks

Communicating honestly and objectively with our subjects and audiences

It is assumed that when we engage in scholarly research we will communicate publicly what we learn as a result of our investigations. It is further assumed that we will communicate honestly and objectively. What does this mean, especially with respect to religious studies, in which scholars follow diverse normative models with regard to the epistemological validity claims of their investigations and write and speak variously as religiously committed and non-committed observers? Many scholars of religion undertake their studies and communicate what they have learned primarily as members of particular religions addressing fellow members. This occurs from time to time especially in fields like Biblical studies, Church history, Rabbinic studies, Islamic law, theology and religious ethics. In contrast, many religiously committed scholars, like their nonreligious colleagues, communicate assuming that their audiences have no faith commitments whatsoever. In turn, religiously committed audiences often find the research of nonreligious scholars both instructive and insightful. Thus, what is especially characteristic of religious studies is the considerable extent to which scholarly investigations are often intentionally addressed, sometimes at the same time, to communities of scholarship and communities of religious adherents and sometimes exclusively to one or the other. More than scholars in many other fields, particular religious researchers are likely to be communicating to quite different kinds of audiences, sometimes quite broadly and at other times much more focused, some in overt religious terms, and some overtly secular.

We honour the norm of honest communication, to the extent that we do not intentionally misrepresent or overlook pertinent evidence and do not deliberately evade or avoid relevant questions addressed to us. Correspondingly, we regard plagiarism—the direct utilization of the words and/or ideas of others without appropriate citation—as a fundamental wrong. While plagiarism clearly contravenes the principle of honest communication, there are other questionable practices that are more ambiguous. For example, at times scholarly communication has taken the form of 'bi-passing monologues' as scholars have responded to their own questions and ignored those raised by adversaries.[5] Although in past centuries many Catholics and Protestants seemed to have operated in keeping with this caricature, modern Protestant and Catholic scholars have become much more responsive to concerns raised by alternative traditions of research (Gustafson 1978). Minimally, the norms for honest communication call for those engaged in research to articulate intelligibly and not muffle their own positions, to attend to what their communicating partners say sufficiently so that they can at least identify the reasons others give for what they say, and to interact reciprocally, taking turns and taking up and responding to what the others say in what we in turn communicate (Bird 1996: 191–250). There is often a strong temptation to discount, to minimize the importance of, or to misrepresent information that seems to counter the primary positions we are seeking to put forward and defend. In these kinds of circumstances, the collegial and public character of scholarship provides an antidote. We invite others, known and unknown, to review what we have communicated and to challenge, to the extent it seems appropriate, to assess whether we have in significant ways misrepresented or misinterpreted relevant information.

Honest and objective accounts are not necessarily meant to function as accurate representations or mirrors of reality (see Rorty 1980). Rather, they serve as our attempts forthrightly to present what we have learned, to make sense of the data we have collected, and to develop re-presentations and frames of reference that allow others to recognize, comprehend, and utilize this knowledge in reliable ways.

In practical terms, given the opportunity to review our work, our sources/informants should be able to recognize themselves in our account of them. To begin with, in our accounts we should attempt to acknowledge how our subjects represent themselves even if, for comparative or historical purposes or because of our own assessments, we represent them in different terms and in different ways. However, it is important to note that an honest and objective account does not mean that we must agree with our subjects. To be sure, what we subsequently write about our sources may not be well received by all who read what we write. This was the case when modern Biblical scholars argued about how the Bible was written: many believers were offended by what Biblical scholars had been asserting about how and by whom the Bible was written over a number of centuries. Note well, however, that the angry response to modern Biblical research was largely but not exclusively occasioned by the positions that researchers maintained rather than by the way the research itself was conducted. To be sure, some believers objected to the secular way in which researchers treated the biblical texts. More recently, similar charges have been levied by Muslim believers against scholars applying redactive criticism to the Qur'an.

Ordinarily, as scholars, we regard accounts of research to be public, and thereby objective, to the degree that they are written, orally delivered and/or otherwise communicated to people who share different as well as similar political, ideological and moral, and religious views, to critics as well as supporters, to participants as well as those not involved, to strangers as well as colleagues. Private and privileged accounts typically are often initially unintelligible to outsiders. To outsiders they appear as closed language games, which are largely incomprehensible to those not immediately involved. However, much religious scholarship is undertaken and communicated by people who are members of particular religious

communities and may correspondingly be communicating in part with others within their communities. In what ways can this kind of communication be objective and public? Is it possible to identify standards for objective and public communication of research knowledge both by secular and religiously committed scholars, writing both to the public in general and to members of their own traditions?

For communications to be regarded as public and objective—even when audiences are fellow religious members—they must fulfil three criteria. First, observations and explanations must be expressed in ways that allow them to be refuted (Barker 1995: 294). This is the reverse of saying they must be verifiable. In general terms, reports can be verified if it is possible to administer tests or observations that will either support these reports or result in their non-verification or falsification. Accounts are refutable to the degree that it is possible to identify changes in conditions that would thereby render observations and explanations untrue or undemonstrated. Second, data must be expressed in terms and measures that allow for comparative assessments. If we are to report our research publicly, then researchers must do so in ways that allow our diverse audiences to measure, calibrate or compare reported findings in relation to data with which they are already familiar. These comparisons may assume diverse forms. The readers of reports may wish to compare historical events, ritual practices or ancient legends. To the degree that as observers we give only our personal views, much as travellers do as they report on their journeys, our accounts neither invite nor readily allow for comparisons. They remain personal statements. To the degree that they utilize common measures, researchers in contrast allow and invite their audiences to undertake their own comparisons and assessments. Third, in principle public communications expect and welcome not just affirmations and agreements, but reasoned responses from observers who initially may well take different views. Recognizing that it is possible for us to err in our judgements and to misperceive in our observations, the norm of objectivity, which calls for us to make public accounts of our research, serves as a self-correcting procedure. By giving public accounts, we invite others to be on the lookout for what we might overlook or misconstrue.

Box 1.6.4 Communicating honestly and objectively with our subjects and audiences

More than scholars in many other fields, religious researchers communicate with different kinds of audiences—some broadly, some more focused, some in overt religious terms and some overtly secular.

- Do not intentionally misrepresent or overlook pertinent evidence
- Do not deliberately evade or avoid relevant questions
- Our sources/informants should be able to recognize themselves in our account of them

Three criteria for public and objective research:

- Research observations and explanations must be refutable or verifiable
- Data must be expressed in terms that allow for comparison
- Public reports welcome reasoned responses and corrections of information that may have been overlooked or misconstrued

Responsibly exercising judgement

As researchers, gathering and organizing information and reporting on our studies, we face a number of alternatives regarding what we pay attention to, what questions we raise, and what and how we choose to communicate. That is: we have a number of choices in terms of how we engage in the overlapping conversations that are integral to the practice of research. We use the word 'judgement' to describe how we make up our minds in relation to these alternatives. There are no automatic formulae, error-free methodologies or inherently correct ways of proceeding either in relation to our subjects or in relation to our audiences. We must consider alternatives, determine what evidence has greater weight and ponder varying degrees of significance. At several different moments in the research process, we inevitably have to exercise judgement. We are called to communicate as clearly as possible how we have arrived at the judgements we make.

Typically, the issues about which we have to exercise judgement assume the following forms:

- To what degree has a particular ethical issue emerged as an instance of moral wrongdoing, a case of a shortfall from a moral ideal, as a moral dilemma, or as complex concern involving all three different kinds of ethical issues? What particular ethical standards have greatest weight with regard to this issue? To what degree should we expend greater efforts to prevent or punish overt wrongs, encourage people to work to reduce ethical shortfalls, or resolve ethical dilemmas?
- What information shall we pay attention to and how reliable is this information? What forms of observation seem likely to be most informative, penetrating and reliable? Researchers are well advised, for example, to exercise critical judgement regarding the veracity and reliability of the information we receive from the others we are studying. Yet, to what extent can we rely on the data and terms of reference of our informants—whether they are currently living subjects or dead authors? To what degree might their accounts be self-serving or self-deceptive?
- Should we pay our informants out of respect for the time they spend or in regard to the value of the information they provide? Is paying them liable to affect the character of the information we receive? Conversely, is it appropriate to accept funding from the communities we study? When is it acceptable to accept funding from the military or from organizations like the Templeton Foundation with strong ideological agendas? Would such funding compromise the professional integrity of the research project and mark a researcher as a 'kept scholar', a moniker that new religious movement scholar Susan Palmer uses to advise against this practice (Palmer 2001: 114). What about otherworldly gifts offered by communities—prayers, blessings, salvation? Are they more acceptable? Should such gestures be included in our research findings?
- What significance should we attach to our own feelings and impressions occasioned by this information? To what degree can and should we reference our own immediate impressions as relevant direct or indirect sources of information?
- As we undertake our research, to what extent are our observations influenced by our own unacknowledged perspectives, biases and blind spots? As researchers we often proceed as representatives of privileged classes. As Peter Gottschalk observed of his fieldwork research experiences in rural India, his presence raised many suspicions. Residents wondered why a privileged American, assumed to live in luxury and convenience, would want to live alongside and study impoverished rural Indians? What would be the consequences of his

research? Was he a scholar intent on robbing their cultural treasures as the imperial powers of colonial times had previously robbed the nation? (Gottschalk 2001: 54).

- What restraints should be applied to ensure the research does not cause undue hardship for the community? This is particularly important for studies of marginalized religious communities that could be used by government authorities or powerful social organizations interested in the suppression, surveillance and/or control of the community (see discussions of portraying New Religious Movements (Palmer 2001), or Indigenous Traditions associated with political conflicts (Baum 2001)).
- How active should scholars be in the groups studied? Is it appropriate to join a group? Should a scholar train or criticize religious/ritual experts, where this possibility arises?
- How do we evaluate the religious, social, artistic and ethical significance of our findings?

Ethically, as researchers, we should inform our audiences of how and why we have chosen to handle these value-laden judgements in the way we have rather than in alternative ways. Through ongoing conversations with colleagues and others, we should seek out counsel and advice. We should provide clear, intelligible reasons for our choices in the introductory comments, statement on research methods and/or at other appropriate points in the body of our analysis. In so far as possible, we should attempt to distinguish and not conflate our judgements regarding facts, causes and reliable information from our judgements influenced by overt religious and moral values.

Box 1.6.5 Responsibly exercising judgement

- No automatic formulae, error-free methodologies or inherently correct ways
- Consider all options to determine what evidence has greater weight
- Ponder varying degrees of significance
- Seek out counsel and advice from colleagues and others
- Provide clear, intelligible reasons for our choices in the introductory comments, statement on research methods and/or at other appropriate points in the body of our analysis

Although the issues in relation to which we make value-laden judgements are diverse, it may be instructive to consider at greater length one example—concerning the uses of deception, in this instance in the form of covert investigations in field studies. A number of researchers have defended covert studies as a justifiable means for gaining information about extreme groups. They argue that it might otherwise be impossible to obtain reliable information because the groups are secretive and do not allow for outside research (Barrett 1987; Homan 1980; Reynolds 1982). For example, in order to gain fuller information about a right wing neo-Nazi group, Matthew Lauder pretended to act not only as an interested and sympathetic observer—which he could do without deception—but as an apparent convert. He later justified his deception in cost-benefit terms because of the information he thereby obtained (Lauder 2003).

How should we responsibly exercise judgement in these kinds of cases? After all, initial deception, followed by subsequent debriefings, is sometimes used in experimental studies

so that subjects will respond spontaneously to the cues of the experiment. Moreover, frequently researchers will inform their subjects about some but not all of the objectives of their investigations so that subjects and informants respond more candidly than they would if they were more fully informed. For example, Robert Jackall told his informants that he was studying leadership in organizations because respondents tended to provide superficial and canned responses when informed that he was actually investigating how people practised ethics in organizations (Jackall 1988). Note well, in both of these examples researchers fully declare themselves to be researchers. Subjects know they are being investigated.

To exercise judgement responsibly in these kinds of cases, we need to take into account and balance a number of different and relevant considerations. First, in order to respect the autonomy and privacy of the individuals from whom we obtain information, as we noted previously in this chapter, we need to protect any information, including their identities, that they provide us in confidence. However, second, as we observe further in this chapter, even as unannounced observers we can report on activities of such groups in so far as these take place in settings open to the public. Nevertheless, third, because we are expected to provide honest and objective accounts of our research, our reports must be based on data more reliable, in this case at least, than hearsay we might obtain from covert inquiries. To be reliable, such information needs to be corroborated by other observers, other documented evidence, or the overt confirmation of other group members. How otherwise will researchers know they are not being misled by grudge informants or exceptional rather than representative information? Fourth, when researchers are seeking to expose practices that we judge to be dangerous or illegal, then in these cases minimally we can be expected to obtain from appropriate offices the scholarly equivalent of 'search warrants'. That is, as we already discussed, before we place ourselves or our subjects at greater risk because of the character of our investigations, we need to discuss with—and seek the counsel of—colleagues or institutional review boards to determine how we might best be expected to manage these risks appropriately. Finally, fifth, it is always worth considering in these kinds of settings whether the difficulties we may face in obtaining fuller accounts from our subjects may reflect our initial feelings of awkwardness and discomfort as investigators and our initial lack of skills in making subjects feel comfortable. The inclination to resort to deception might in some cases become less compelling as we discover alternative ways to gain fuller accounts from our informants.

When we exercise judgement with respect to ethical issues—with regard to research or other matters—we inevitably must address and consider the priority of five different ethical concerns. These are as follows: first, what is the right as opposed to the wrong way of acting—viewed either in relation to minimum obligations or standards of excellence (Fuller 1964)? Second, what is the good we are seeking to realize—viewed either in utilitarian terms as outcomes or Aristotelian terms as purposes? Third, how as persons can we act in ways that are morally worthwhile (virtuous) and not blameworthy? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider our motives and dispositions. Fourth, what ways of acting are expected by relevant customs, traditions and institutional norms? Finally, fifth, in relation to current structures of power and indifference, what courses of action are practical or exigent? Typically, we assign priority to certain questions—and our answers to these questions—and assume that the other questions are thereby resolved. However, because that is not always the case, we are called upon to exercise judgement.[6]

Exercising judgement as researchers calls for us to consider diverse issues and values, to reflect on the bearing of basic principles on the issues at hand, and to seek counsel from

colleagues as we make up our minds. Ultimately, we need to determine which norms and values have greatest weight and the highest priority.

Part two: Institutional research ethics

Currently the term 'research ethics' often brings to mind the processes by which researchers secure formal research ethics approvals or 'certificates of ethical acceptability' before engaging in funded or non-funded research with human subjects. Not surprising, the increased demands have contributed to a growing critical discourse on this process, especially as it is applied to research in the social sciences and humanities (see Kitchen 2007; Curran 2006; Hallowell *et al.* 2005; Lincoln 2005; Corwin and Tierney 2005; Lincoln and Tierney 2004). There is a strong current of thought that sees this regulated process as just one more time-consuming bureaucratic hoop to jump through in the effort to secure funding for research, a step that for the most part is unnecessary especially for projects deemed as having minimal risk (see Lincoln and Tierney 2004; Hallowell *et al.* 2005). Other voices point to the increased demands and inconsistent application of ethical codes across institutions as having contributed to a subtle form of research censorship (Corwin and Tierney 2005; Kent *et al.* 2002). Still others support the more serious charge that the process is mired in methodological conservatism, which emphasizes a biomedical research model which has not only stifled the development of various qualitative research approaches in the social sciences but which limits the range of research available to other academics, the communities studied and to public policy forums (Kitchen 2007; Lincoln 2005; Corwin and Tierney 2005; Lincoln and Tierney 2004). Each voice raises important questions that will continue to inform revisions to ethical protocols and to the boards that govern the process.

Within the growing literature on research ethics, there is also increasing concern that the level of importance given to the narrow range of issues governed by the regulated ethics approval process has skewed our attention (O'Leary 2005; Curran 2006; Hallowell *et al.* 2005; Oliver 2003). Regulated ethics approval or the receipt of a **certificate of ethical acceptability** does not guarantee that a research project will avoid all ethical issues related to a given research endeavour, as not all ethical dilemmas can be determined *a priori*. Instead, it is important to remember that ethical dilemmas, such as the ones listed above, can and do occur at various points throughout the research experience, that they are more often than not unexpected, and that they are not necessarily easy to resolve. To that end it is important that researchers apply due diligence to uphold the general ethical principles for research discussed in the previous section throughout all stages of the research endeavour beyond simply meeting regulatory requirements.

Of course, many also see the formal research ethics review as an important process not only for ensuring that research subjects are respected and protected from undue harms, but for reminding us that research with human subjects carries with it clear ethical obligations and responsibilities. Some go so far as to recognize the regulated ethics review process as an increasingly positive and important peer-review process that legitimizes a research project through demonstrated institutional confidence with crucial aspects of the research endeavour (Curran 2006; Hallowell *et al.* 2005; O'Leary 2005; Kent *et al.* 2002).

Whether we agree or not with the goals, objectives and/or results of the process, **regulated research ethics** are here to stay and require our attention. Thus the chapter closes with a discussion of regulated research ethics, including a brief history, an overview of the minimum ethical obligations upheld by the various international and professional ethical protocols in use today, and some practical advice for negotiating this process in our own research endeavours.

A brief history

Public concern about research practices involving humans can be traced to the 19th century when questions were raised not only about the undue harms that befell biomedical research subjects but also the deceptive or coercive methods employed by researchers (see Faden *et al.* 1986). While such public debates raised awareness of the need for regulated research ethics, it was not until after the Nuremberg trials, where horrors of the abusive medical and psychological experiments conducted in the Nazi death camps were brought to light, that the first internationally recognized protocol for ethical research with human subjects was established—the Nuremberg Code (1947–49) (see summary of standards in Box 1.6.6). The ethical standards outlined in the Nuremberg Code inspired the second international research ethics code in the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (1964, latest revision 2000).

Box 1.6.6 Nuremberg Code (1947–49)

The ten standards of the Nuremberg Code are condensed as follows:

- Voluntary consent is essential to participate
- Researchers must fully inform volunteers of the character and purpose of the study
- The research must maximize benefits and minimize risks to subjects in the study
- Researchers are responsible for protecting participants against any harm
- Participants must be informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time
- Qualified researchers must lead and conduct the study
- The study should be terminated if adverse effects emerge
- Society should benefit from study findings
- Research on humans should be based on previous animal or other previous work
- A research study should never begin if there is a reason to believe that death or injury may result

Despite the wide adoption of these ethical protocols, abuses and exploitation of human research subjects continued. In the United States there are several touchstone cases including the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–72), the Willowbrook hepatitis experiments (1963–66), the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital Study (1963), the psychotropic drug experiments of Project Camelot (1964), Stanley Milgram's psychological deception studies, and the work of social scientists directed toward covert military purposes in Vietnam (Curran 2006; Lincoln 2005; Corwin and Tierney 2005; Milgram 1974). By 1974, the publicity surrounding these scandals pushed the United States government to pass the National Research Act which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The commission was charged: to determine the boundaries between biomedical and behavioral research; to assess risk-benefit criteria to determine the appropriateness of research; to identify appropriate guidelines for the selection of human subjects; and to define the nature and boundaries of informed consent in various research settings (OHSR 2010). The central policy document of the Commission, the Belmont Report (1979), includes principles similar to the general ethical principles of research discussed in the previous section; however, they are more narrowly defined with an emphasis on practical application. The three basic ethical principles to guide research practice in that report are: **respect for persons**

as autonomous agents who voluntarily participate in the research; **beneficence** or the obligation to ensure the well-being of all research subjects throughout the research process—to maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms; and **justice**, or fair distribution of burdens and benefits of research amongst diverse cultural, social, gender, racial and ethnic groups to eliminate any biases. These are linked to the following practical issues: **informed consent**, assessment of risks/benefits of the research methods and overall intentions of the project, and fair and equitable selection/protection of subjects (see Box 1.6.7).

Box 1.6.7 Belmont Report (USA, 1979)

Three basic ethical principles for human research

- Respect for persons: including autonomy of individuals and protection of persons with diminished autonomy
- Beneficence: respect persons' well-being, to maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms
- Justice: benefits and risks of research must be distributed fairly

Application of the three ethical principles

- Informed consent: ensure that all research subjects are *informed* of the research project's purpose, procedure, risks and anticipated benefits; have a *clear understanding* of research objectives; and *voluntarily* agree to participate, with the option to withdraw at any time
- Assessment of risks and benefits: *ongoing assessment* of respondents' well-being with *immediate response* to any immediate or long-term risks
- Selection of subjects: ensure *fair procedures and outcomes* for selecting research subjects; and ensure all *subject information is protected* (i.e. anonymity in collection, storage of information)

These moral principles were subsequently codified as the Common Rule (1991), which offers detailed guidelines for identifying the minimal ethical obligations that must be met before proceeding with any research involving human subjects. The Common Rule also included the clear directive for universities and research institutes to establish Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to ensure that all federally funded and increasingly non-funded research complies with research ethics regulations (Curran 2006; OHSR 2010).

The regulation of research ethics in Canada followed a similar trajectory to that of the United States. In 1978 the federally funded Medical Research Council (MRC) adopted the first ethical research guidelines in Canada (revised 1987), with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) following suit in 1981. In 1997 the MRC and SSHRC joined together with the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) to adopt the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) (revised 2010). As with the Common Rule in the United States, the TCPS recognizes the same three minimum ethical principles and associated applications for research involving humans as identified in the Belmont Report. The TCPS also includes clear directives for the establishment, scope and power of Research Ethics Boards (REBs) in

the review process. When the agencies adopted the first edition of the TCPS in 1998, it was with the commitment that it be a living or 'evolving' document that could respond to new forms of research and address any oversights. This commitment was demonstrated in the 2010 version of the document, which responds to expressed concerns regarding a perceived over-emphasis on biomedical research methods in evaluating qualitative research with the introduction of a dedicated chapter devoted to the distinct nature of qualitative research (Panel of Research Ethics 2010). The revised policy also offers clearer guidelines for REBs about the types of observational research that are exempt from the review process (e.g. where the observation is of a public act accessible to all, such as observing a weekly religious worship service open to the public).

Box 1.6.8 Research Ethics Framework, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (UK, 2005)

Six core principles:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved
- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion
- Harm to research participants must be avoided
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit

It will be the responsibility of institutions to ensure that these are met. ESRC will adopt a 'light touch' approach to monitoring but will ultimately have the option to withhold funding from an institution in breach of the framework.

(Research Ethics Framework, from the ESRC website, 2010)

It was not until 2003 that the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) set out to develop the Research Ethics Framework (REF) (adopted in 2005, revised 2010). Like the TCPS, the REF is considered a 'living' document that will develop over time. As with the TCPS and the Common Rule, the REF provides a framework to guide the establishment of Research Ethics Councils (RECs) to oversee the institutional review process, although with the directive that monitoring take a 'light touch' approach (ESRC 2005). The six core principles of the REF address many of the same ethical concerns noted above: namely the need for informed consent, participant confidentiality, a risks/benefit analysis regulated through a formal review process (see Box 1.6.8). Hallowell *et al.* suggest that the delay in the UK adoption of the REF for social science and humanities research was due in part to researchers relying more on a self-regulated approach that respected the ethical research codes provided by their respective professional associations, for example the British Psychological Society or the British Sociological Association (Hallowell *et al.* 2005: 143).

Box 1.6.9 Selected professional organizations that offer research ethics protocols for research involving human subjects

Australia

- Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) of the National Health and Medical Research Council
- Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- Law Reform Commission (ALRC)
- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)
- Research Council (ARC)

Canada

- Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS)
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)
- Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards (CAREB)
- Canadian Association of University Research Administrators (CAURA)
- Canadian Bioethics Society
- Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research
- Canadian Sociological Association
- Health Canada—Research Ethics Board
- National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)
- National Council on Ethics in Human Research (NCEHR)
- National Research Council (NRC), Biotechnology Research Institute
- Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC)
- Panel for Research Ethics (PRE) (Office overseeing the Tri-Council Policy Statement)
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

France

- Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS)
- Comité d'éthique pour les sciences (COMETS)
- Conférence Nationale des Comités de Protection des Personnes en Recherche Biomédicale
- Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM)
- National Ethics Advisory Committee for the Life Sciences and Health

The Netherlands

- Dutch Health Law

New Zealand

- Health Research Council

Norway

- National Research Ethics Committees
- Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board

Sweden

- Swedish Research Councils

United Kingdom

- Department of Health
- Economic and Social Research Council (Research Ethics Framework)
- Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
- Medical Research Council Nuffield
- Council on Bioethics
- Social Research Association
- Wellcome Trust

United States

- Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP)
- African Studies Association (ASA)
- American Anthropological Association (AAA)
- American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)
- American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)
- American Educational Research Association
- American Indian Law Center
- American Psychological Association (APA)
- American Sociological Association (ASA)
- Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER)
- Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) (Belmont Report and the Common Rule)
- National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC, 1995–2001)
- National Human Research Protections Advisory Committee (NHRPAC)
- National Institutes of Health, Office of Human Subjects Research (OHSR)
- President's Council on Bioethics Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research (PRIMandR)

Multinational organizations

- Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS)
- Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with Regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine
- European Commission IST Respect Project
- An EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research
- European Forum for Good Clinical Practice

- European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE)
- Human Genome Organization (HUGO)
- International Conference on Harmonization of Technical Requirements of Pharmaceuticals for Human Use
- International Society of Ethnobiology
- Nordic Committee on Bioethics
- Nuremberg Code
- UNESCO Global Ethics Observatory

As the above survey suggests, regulated research ethics has become an institutionalized requirement across the academy. (See Box 1.6.9 for an extended list of regulated ethics protocols endorsed by various governments, academic and professional research organizations.) It has become standard for universities, research institutes and funding agencies to require all research involving human subjects to undergo a process of review to ensure that all proposed and current research practices meet these minimal ethics standards. Ostensibly, to the degree that their research does not directly involve human subjects, investigators undertaking historical, literary, archaeological or textual studies are not required to submit their research to these kinds of institutional review processes. Nonetheless, it is useful to know and honour these guidelines even when researchers do not have to submit their research plans for institutional review.

Negotiating the review process

In keeping with the regulated directives discussed above, universities and research institutes have established formal ethics review boards in countries around the world (e.g. IRBs in the United States; REBs in Canada; RECs in the UK), constituted by a representative group of researchers as well as qualified legal and medical professionals able as a group to determine whether proposed or current research endangers human subjects, abuses their rights, or violates legal standards. These boards are accountable to the senior administration and the universities or institutes as a whole. Negatively stated, it is their responsibility to make sure that researchers do not engage in practices that might occasion unnecessary and unjustifiable harm to research subjects and thereby put the larger institutions at risk for losing funding or allowing these unwarranted practices. Typically, there may be several ethics review boards at a given university, covering the research of different faculties, or differentiated in terms of the character and scope of the research projects. All research involving human subjects is supposed to be reviewed by these boards, whether it is funded or non-funded, whether it involves formal projects or informal class assignments, whether it takes the form of contract research or research related to graduate theses. In practice, most universities allow for more informal processes of review for more informal or minimal-risk research (see sample review flowchart in Figure 1.6.1). For the most part, this review process focuses on ethical issues in terms of possible wrongs, although in practice they may help researchers address ethical shortfalls and dilemmas.

The review process calls for researchers to fill out forms developed for this purpose. In general most institutions also host offices to support faculty and students through the process by providing the necessary forms/guidebooks and sometimes hosting workshops on how to negotiate the process. Many also host websites for easy access to necessary information. In

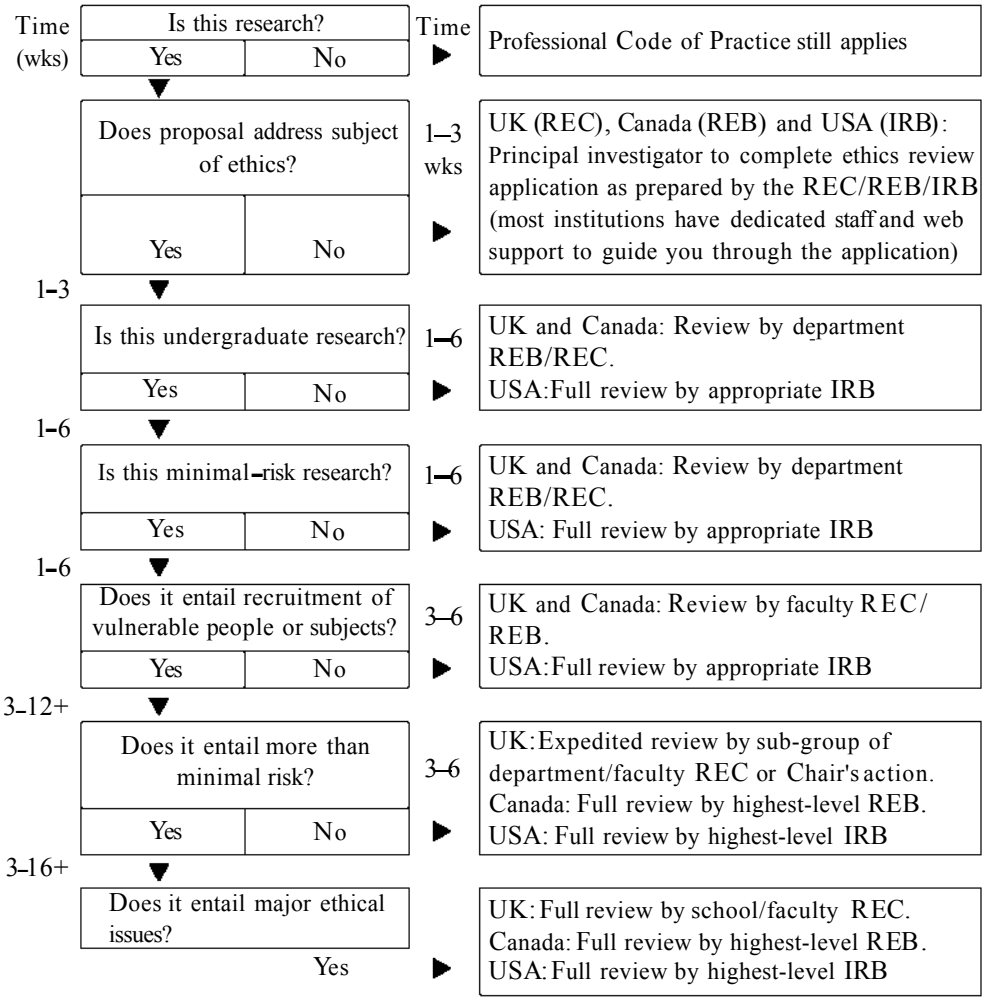

Figure 1.6.1 Sample flowchart of the ethical review process

(Adapted from the ESRC's REF Guidelines, 2010 (www.esrc.ac.uk))

keeping with the minimal obligations discussed above, for most research review applications expect researchers to:

- Describe research including methodologies and benefits of research;
- Describe the study population;
- Address specific questions regarding informed consent including uses of possible deception, right to discontinue and proposed methods for ensuring the confidentiality of all research subjects;
- Identify any potential risks the research poses to subjects and offer clear methods for minimizing the impact;
- Describe the potential for 'heinous discovery' in the research with a response plan if required;
- Define plans for securely storing the data collected;

- Offer a clear indication that the project will comply with all related governing ethical protocols, both those specific to the application process and those endorsed by related professional associations; and
- Provide copies of the proposed research instruments including sample questionnaires, interview schedules and consent forms.

The Board members in turn are expected to review this material, to look especially for missing information and questions that have not been fully answered, and to determine whether proposed research complies with basic standards. Conceived of in strict terms, Ethics Review Boards often play a policing role. After all, they are expected to be scrupulous in exercising due caution. They are expected to identify, call into question and prohibit research procedures that fail to meet the basic standards. However, it is important to recognize that these Boards do not exclusively think of themselves as agents of censure. Rather, their mandate is to facilitate ethically responsible research practices. Often in a collaborative fashion, they seek to warn researchers what is expected and to help and counsel them so that researchers design their research in appropriate ways.

Depending on the level of risk posed by proposed research, time to complete the review process can take from three weeks to several months. The extended time frames are most often related to the not uncommon request for further clarification of research methods, processes of consent or confidentiality and/or clarification of specific ethical concerns related to the research participants.

In trying to determine whether the research we are planning needs to undergo this kind of institutional review process, the long answer requires looking at the somewhat different stipulations of different universities and funding agencies. However, a shorter answer turns on how we as researchers would be able to answer two questions about public access and risk. If, for instance, the access we are using to gain information about our research topic is public—in the sense that we can gather our information at public gatherings or from public media, then ordinarily our research plans do not need to pass through the formal institutional review process. For example, a classroom-based research project that asks students to attend a public religious service falls within the minimal risk category because the research is accessing publicly available information, and it is not likely the students will be so involved with research subjects to adversely affect the subject or student through the research. Nonetheless, it is necessary to check with our institutions to confirm that this type of minimal-risk research is exempt. In some institutions the minimal risk status of projects means that the review process will be handled through a departmental review committee, a process that can often be completed within two-to-three weeks. Alternatively, studies examining religious attitudes or spiritual practices of youth or indigenous peoples typically require more scrutiny. Because both demographic groups have been identified as vulnerable or requiring special care in assessing research participation, the research proposal would automatically be placed in the more than minimal risk category, which calls for more formal review by the larger faculty or institutional board.

Notes

1 This paragraph briefly summarizes sociological and philosophical observations developed in a much longer essay on the diverse ways in which ethical ideas are communicated. Frederick Bird 'The Cultural Forms of Morality' unpublished essay.

2 Based upon our readings regarding this topic and our experiences as researchers, we have identified these three principles. We discuss a number of sub-themes related to each principle. For the sake of

simplicity, we have tried to provide an overview, organized in relation to these three principles, recognizing that it is possible to elaborate much further on a number of these sub-themes and the issues and concerns associated with them. These three principles are already widely acknowledged, although often in slightly different terms.

3 In principle, research is justifiable only in so far as it is judged to be 'good' research—that is, research that is thought out, organized and reported on in ways that are likely to produce reliable information that can be intelligibly communicated. Hence, typically the initial question asked with respect to research involving human subjects is whether colleagues and/or supervisors have already reviewed the proposed research and deemed it worth pursuing.

4 This in no way rules out functional interpretations of religious phenomena or even some interpretations that Bellah might refer to as reductionistic. Scholars can make whatever interpretations they feel called upon to make. They may argue that the accounts of their subjects are self-serving and/or self-deceptive. However, we suggest that they should, at the outset of their research, take account of how the subjects of their research choose to present themselves.

5 The phrase 'bi-passing monologues' comes from a study by Piaget (1955) of interactions between children.

6 For a fuller statement of this model of ethical decision-making see Bird and Gandz 1991; Bird 2005.

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Further reading

Hallowell, N., Lawton, J. and Gregory, S., 2005. *Reflections on Research: the realities of doing research in the social sciences*. Open University Press, Berkshire.

This text highlights a multitude of practical and ethical complexities that occur in our efforts to negotiate the day-to-day realities of doing social science research. While the authors tend to concentrate on research drawn primarily from the field of health care, the hundreds of examples included throughout offer a wide range of responses to some of the

more personal issues each researcher encounters in fieldwork research, namely how to maintain control of the research, how to respond to emotionally charged encounters, and how to ensure appropriate ethical care of others while at the same time protecting ourselves from over-investment in the research.

Kitchen, H., 2007. *Research Ethics and the Internet: negotiating Canada's tri-council policy statement*. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point, NS.

This short text addresses some of the particular ethical concerns facing researchers whose work focuses on gathering and analyzing data collected on the Internet, including securing regulated ethics consent, informed consent and techniques for engaging your research subjects.

Robbins, T. and Zabloki. B., 2001. *Misunderstanding Cults: searching for objectivity in a controversial field*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

This anthology offers some candid reflections on the ethical quandaries that scholars of new religious movements may encounter. From concerns of being labelled a closet convert, hired gun or undercover agent, contributors discuss the challenges scholars encounter when fully engaged in participant/observation fieldwork research with new religious movements.

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This particular issue is dedicated to the ethics of fieldwork research in religion, with contributions from scholars who have conducted traditional and non-traditional studies of religious communities around the globe.

Alver, B.G., Fjell, T.I and Øyen, Ø. (eds). 2007. *Research Ethics in Studies of Culture and Social Life*. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Helsinki, Finland.

This collection of essays addresses key issues within social science research including protecting individual integrity, obtaining informed consent, special considerations for research in private or intimate arenas, research with vulnerable groups, weighing the socio-political consequences of research, cross-culture studies and assessing underlying value structures that inform research ethics.

Key concepts

Certificate of ethical acceptability: issued to research projects approved through the regulated ethics review process.

Ethical dilemmas: situations in which it is possible to arrive at more than one ethically justified position.

Ethical wrongs: ethical issues that emerge in clear violation of basic ethical or legal standards.

Fundamental regulated ethical principles:

- **Respect for persons:** recognizes that research subjects are autonomous agents who after being supplied with adequate information about the research project, may decide to voluntarily participate in the research.
- **Beneficence:** obliges researchers to ensure, as far as possible, the well-being of all research subjects. In other words, we have both a duty to do good or to maximize all possible benefits to the research subject while at the same time be aware of the duty to refrain from causing harm or to minimize all possible harms.
- **Justice:** requires researchers to consider the biases that research might levy against various groups of people. More precisely, in designing the research, consideration must be given to the fair distribution of burdens and benefits of research amongst diverse cultural, social, gender, racial and ethnic groups to eliminate any biases.

Informed consent: the ethical requirement to clearly and fully inform all research subjects about the character and purposes of the research project and to solicit their voluntary consent to participate in the research process.

Moral shortfalls: not overt wrongs but shortfalls in meeting fundamental ethical principles or institutional guidelines.

Regulated research ethics: The more precise ethical research rules that refer to the minimal obligations that must be met in order to receive formal approval from institutional ethical reviews of research projects involving human subjects.

2 Ways of studying religion off campus

Academic approaches and issues

Introduction

The academic study of religion within modern universities continues an evolving and ever-shifting method of seeking to understand a huge variety of human phenomena that we label 'religion'. The way in which this is done, and the very concept or category that we are meaning when we use the word 'religion', is hotly contested between the different disciplines that have informed current studies.

For centuries, theological discourse dominated approaches, and of course this is still important in many universities, but in recent years, religious studies has sought to distance itself from its nineteenth-century roots within comparative religion, encased as this was in a Protestant theological academic heritage. Now is not the place to discuss this relationship at length (others have done this recently from a variety of viewpoints, including McCutcheon (2003) and Oliver and Warrier (2008)) but we raise it again, as we believe that a focus on living religion is perhaps the best way to advance the study of religion. Indeed, by re-examining religion as performed in everyday lives, we may perhaps avoid the essentialising mistakes of the past, which led to a concentration on texts, founders, 'core beliefs' and other round holes into which generations of scholars have sought to plug the square pegs of a great diversity of religious traditions. Suzanne Owen (2011), in her important article 'The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change', argues that the World Religions paradigm, which was produced by this narrow academic inheritance, approaches religious traditions outside of their very specific and particular contexts, thus failing to do justice to the very things we are studying. Sutcliffe and Gilhus concur when they argue that "the pioneers of the study of religion largely ignored local phenomena in their own backyards and projected their theories onto 'others', elsewhere" (Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013, 2). Stringer also notes the influence of Protestant Christianity upon the study of 'other' religious traditions when he wryly comments that (to scholars operating within this outdated model) "Buddhism is good. Hinduism is suspect, except in its intellectual traditions. The work of theologians is good. The so-called 'superstitious' practices of ordinary believers are generally not worthy of our attention." (Stringer, 2011, 2)

In recent scholarship which seeks to redress this balance, Harvey has coined the phrase 'elsewhering' religion. By this, he means that we should not approach the focus of our study – this 'thing' called 'religion' – through the largely Christian inheritance of Western academia, but seek to approach religion, both as a concept and as a lived reality, through a diversity of approaches which privilege embodied performative everyday action rather than 'belief'. Harvey argues that by doing this, we understand religions, including Christianity, better. We can explore religion as we find it, rather than mould it to meet the cultural essentialisms of what we expect to find. An important part of this approach is to understand that if we start with embodied, localised understandings of religion, we are already, even as neophyte researchers, helping to develop the discipline. As Harvey notes, "In every lived religion the processes of change and exchange that follow from encountering others and alternatives are everyday" (Harvey, 2013, 177), that is, change and complexity, played out by individuals and communities, is normative of religion, and it is this everyday process of what may be called 'living with meaning' that we should be studying. We should not accept static 'reported' essentialisms of what 'religion' is or 'religions' are – and so by engaging with the everyday, we not only understand religion on a deeper level, we see, and are a part of, this very process of living change; part of the dynamism of living religion.

Recent scholarship on religion has also furthered our understanding of religion as a 'bottom-up' everyday lived reality, rather than a reified, essentialised 'top-down' phenomenon. In *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, Ammerman (2007) collects together a series of studies which examine, amongst other phenomena, 'unsynagogued Jews' (Davidman, 2007), religious meaning in the lives of pro-life campaigners (Munson, 2007) and the role of religion in civic ceremonies (Lichterman, 2007). The common theme throughout the collected essays is that we must approach religion *as it is lived* rather than as we expect to find it. Likewise, the separation of religious phenomena into 'World Religions', 'New Religions' or 'Indigenous Religions' should be avoided. As Harvey (2009, 7) has argued, the antiquity of traditions categorised as 'World Religions' rarely affects how people engage with (and within) such communities, 'New Religions' are often contextualised within much older cultural continuities, and 'Indigenous Religions' are today likely to be performed in London, Tokyo or New York.

Much of this recent work on living religion can trace a path back to Primiano (1995), who argued that we should use the term 'vernacular religion' to mean the everyday lived reality of religious individuals and communities, rather than the essentialised elite construction of textbook religion previously focused upon by Western academia. Crucially, however, Primiano did not suggest that this everyday vernacular religion sat in opposition to an elite form of religion in reality, but that *all* religion was vernacular religion. This is important, as it means that whether we study congregations or archbishops, devotees or swamis, we are studying vernacular religions – the ways in which people seek meaning in their lives and perform this worldview in their individual and communal daily actions (see Bowman, 2012).

Approaches to fieldwork in the study of religion

Encountering religion in the field is not a modern phenomenon. However, the theory of engagement with people, places and communities, and the importance of fieldwork within the study of religion, has developed apace in recent decades. The related disciplines of anthropology and sociology, about which we will talk in this chapter, have provided a century of inherited learning methodologies and practices, and it is on these shoulders that current scholarship in fieldwork stands. There is, however, a need to understand an approach to fieldwork specific to the academic study of religion, with all of the cultural and academic provenance that this brings, which draws from related disciplines and earlier teachers, but stands as a distinct methodology of approaching the study of religion from a religious studies perspective.

In the social scientific study of religion there are two major differing approaches to research, often called the *quantitative* and *qualitative* methodologies. Quantitative methods use surveys, polls and questionnaires to generate data that is usually presented in figures or graphs – they quantify trends and patterns in religious life. For example, based on quite small samples – sometimes fewer than 1,000 responses – a researcher can generalise about patterns in church attendance and, by comparing the latest results with earlier data, can generalise about changes in practice. For good examples of this sort of data, see the text box below on Social Trends and Religion. These methods produce lots of interesting and valuable material, but fieldwork usually draws more heavily on qualitative methods.

These qualitative approaches, which we shall be concerned with in this chapter, explore the particular details of a specific religious individual or group. This provides lots of rich descriptive detail, and enables the researcher to explore the meanings of religious belief and practice for that person or community. In other words, qualitative research can help us to understand how people make sense of their religion and their world; we get the perspectives of insiders. It is an interpretive approach, more concerned with 'how' and 'why' than 'how many' or 'how much'. Or, to quote one of the foremost anthropologists whom we will explore in more detail below, these fieldwork methods studying a particular group of people are about figuring out "what the devil they think they are up to" (Geertz, 1983, 58). There are lots of different ways of studying religion in the field in this way, and both theory and practice have changed and developed over time.

Qualitative research in the study of religion – recommended sources

There are lots of different handbooks covering the various philosophies and methodologies that make up qualitative research. For example, it would be worth looking at *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Leavy, 2014) or *Emergent Methods in Social Research* (Hesse-Biber and

Leavy, 2006). These books have chapters dealing with all the different approaches which researchers can take, but they are not focused on the study of religion.

The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion (Stausberg and Engler, 2011) takes many of the same theoretical issues and practical approaches, such as epistemology, ethics, grounded theory, discourse analysis or participant observation, and discusses them in the context of the study of religion.

Also of real interest for students beginning to study living religion in the field is the online training resource at the University of Kent: *Research Methods for the Study of Religion*. This has been developed by leading scholars to cover a range of topics, including conceptualising religion, comparative research, ethnography, and politics and ethics. Each topic page has a downloadable discussion paper or structured exercise which introduces key issues. The topic pages also provide additional resources, including sample studies, bibliographies or links to other relevant websites. There are also additional general resources such as journals, blog sites or research centres.

An early example of this approach was that of Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish-born, London-based academic who is often regarded as the pioneer of modern anthropology, and in particular the school of anthropology called *functional* anthropology. Operating in the early decades of the twentieth century, Malinowski rejected the 'armchair' anthropology of the Victorian era – a period when early academics such as E.B. Tylor (1871) and J.G. Frazer (1894) wrote epic works based on cultures that they had either hardly interacted with, or not visited at all. In his most famous work, Malinowski lived alongside inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, just off Papua New Guinea. With an enforced stay of several years due to the outbreak of World War I, Malinowski (1922) developed what has become known as *participant observation*, where the researcher seeks to understand the viewpoint of a culture other than his or her own by living, speaking, engaging and performing daily acts with and within their host community. Such an approach was revolutionary, and prioritised daily interaction with individuals and communities, although it is important to note that Malinowski's (1967) legacy is rather complicated by subsequent discoveries of his diaries, published posthumously in the 1960s, which are underpinned by a strict sense of 'otherness' towards his host communities and often bordered on prejudice and racism. Of course, it is too easy to project back contemporary attitudes to past generations, and some recent anthropologists have found the diaries helpful as they are examples of brutally honest reflective anthropology, but they again highlight the difficulties often faced by academics when writing reflectively about the complex and nuanced interpersonal relationships which sit at the heart of the study of everyday religion.

Ways of studying religion off campus

Following just a few years after Malinowski was E.E. Evans-Pritchard, an English anthropologist who undertook extensive fieldwork with the Azande and Nuer communities in Central Africa. Importantly, Evans-Pritchard approached the communities in which he studied as being *different* from his own cultural norms, but not *primitive*. By living amongst practitioners of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard wrote about such religious practices, not from the viewpoint of a judgemental outsider, but from the viewpoint of one who has shared in and experienced the reality of what witchcraft practices meant to Azande people. In his famous work *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard (1937) argues that the religious system, beliefs and practices which embodied the beliefs of the Azande people were perfectly logical when understood within an Azande worldview. This was of fundamental importance in the development of fieldwork as it was an important step in breaking down false binaries of us/them, advanced/primitive, true/false that were so prevalent in the writings of earlier Victorian scholars. As Evans-Pritchard wrote:

> In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them … You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion … If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.
>
> (Evans-Pritchard, 1973, 4)

Put simply, by engaging with religious practices on a lived daily basis, Evans-Pritchard was able to go beyond the projected essentialisms of normative Western-inherited views of religion, and begin to ask questions about differing religious phenomena *in context*. It is also hugely significant that Evans-Pritchard linked belief with performative action – a theme we will pick up on later.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Clifford Geertz stands as arguably the most influential exponent of anthropological approaches to the study of religion, and is most associated with the development of *symbolic* anthropology. Having undertaken extensive fieldwork in Java, Bali, Sumatra and Morocco, Geertz (1968, vi) understood religion as a system of symbols which uniquely enable and influence specific thoughts and actions within a community. Crucially, this meant that religion had to be understood within a *social context*. Geertz importantly noted that religion is a product of "collectively evolved, socially transmitted, and culturally objectified patterns of meaning – myths, rites, doctrines [and] fetishes … whatever God may or may not be … religion is a social institution, worship a social activity, and faith a social force" (1968, 19). For Geertz (1973), this meant that serious, deep, ethnography must be carried out in order to understand a religious system or worldview, and this led to his coining of the phrase 'thick description'. A 'thick description' is one which seeks not just to

observe and describe a 'foreign' phenomenon, but to realise why such a phenomenon is taking place so as to understand its meaning within a specific social context, and thus make the action understandable to outsiders to that context. This term has become influential in many academic disciplines, and none more so than the contemporary study of religion for, if we are to understand living religion for, say, Hindus in New York or Mormons in Wales, we must understand the very specific and localised social histories and structures which underpin these modern communities.

Such giants of scholarship as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Geertz are examples of the crucial importance of the anthropological method to the development of the modern study of religion, which seeks to answer questions of interaction and relationship with religious communities through a multi-methodological discipline, drawing from different academic inheritances. In addition to the anthropologists, it is also necessary to acknowledge the contribution of several leading sociologists of religion, who continue to influence studies to this day, and from whom we can draw important approaches to the study of religion as a *lived* reality.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) became the first professor of sociology in the 1890s after he had founded France's first university department dedicated to the subject. He was consistently interested in religion – his important early work *On Suicide* (Durkheim, 1897) focused on how suicide could be categorised by its multiple manifestations in different cultures, and specifically contrasted cases of suicide within Catholic and Protestant societies. His magnum opus, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), introduced the powerful, and lastingly influential, concepts of the 'sacred' and the 'profane' and built upon his previous work which argued that society was made up of something he called *solidarity*, which was understood to act as a conduit for the values, customs and beliefs of a social group. This inextricably linked religion to society and, for Durkheim, allowed religion to be explained without recourse to the supernatural.

He argued that humans made God in their own image as, firstly, our sense of moral responsibility comes from an understanding of the needs of our society, and this in turn leads to the creation of a 'God' figure who is seen as the source of this moral imperative, but which is in reality only a reflection of society's absolute claim over its members. Whilst much modern scholarship rejects Durkheim's view that the sacred and the profane are distinct categories, he retains a huge influence in the ways in which religion is studied in universities. He is particularly interesting for our current study as, through his work on the social roots of religious worldviews, he affirms the necessity of examining religion in very specific social contexts, reminding us to pay attention to the cultural milieu in which religious adherents and communities exist.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was, along with Durkheim, a founding father of sociology as an academic discipline. Specifically interested in the development of societies, and the place of religion as a dynamic in this development, Weber's (2011) most famous work was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905, translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1930) which linked the

'success' of capitalist Western nations, over and above other non-capitalist, 'non-Western', 'non-Christian' nations, to Protestant ideologies of hard work, self-reliance and self-improvement. Whilst this evolutionary and rather colonial view must be seen within the political period in which Weber was writing, it highlights how he saw religion as a progressive element of society which could lead to social change. Weber understood religion and society to be so intertwined that he believed that when a functioning capitalist society was created, it meant that the Protestant ethic would have run its course, and the world would become 'disenchanted'. Again, as with Durkheim's central arguments, much recent scholarship does not accept Weber as having been completely correct – particularly with regard to his views on disenchantment, which is challenged by new understandings of what religion is, far removed from narrow views of Protestantism – but he remains important for one particularly relevant approach to the study of religion, which continues to be influential to this day.

Weber, unlike Durkheim, did not look from the social system down onto the individual, but started his investigation of people and communities with the individual and looked up to the society in which they operated. He believed that exploring how people behaved was crucial to understanding our social structures. To do this, he used the phrase *ich verstehe* (I understand). For example, if a person perpetrates a mugging, it is not enough to know that they have committed a crime – we need to understand the personal backstory which explains *why* they did it. In so doing, Weber was not seeking to excuse such actions, but to explain them in a specific social context. Of course, the example does not need to be a negative one linked with crime: a religious act, undertaken by a community which may not be a part of the majority culture in which they live, may at first seem strange, confusing or just plain silly to a scholar who does not share their beliefs and practices, but if we take the time to understand – *verstehen* – we can comprehend rituals, actions and viewpoints within the social and cosmological worldviews of the community in question and, in so doing, we do greater justice to the people and communities involved.

One example of a contemporary sociologist who has done exactly this is Eileen Barker, Emeritus Professor of the Sociology of Religion at the London School of Economics and founder of Inform, about which we talk later. Barker's most famous work is her 1984 text *The Making of a Moonie*, which utilised many of the research techniques we discuss in chapters 4 and 5 to learn about the lives of converts into the Unification Church. Barker was conducting her research at a time of great controversy for the movement, and the late 1970s and early 1980s saw numerous high-profile media stories where families claimed that their relatives were somehow brainwashed or hoodwinked into joining Moonie religious communities. Amidst an onslaught of negativity from media and legislators across both sides of the Atlantic, Barker asked a series of simple questions: Why did people join the organisation? How many stayed for any period of time? What did new converts do within the movement? In so doing, Barker concluded that Moonies were not brainwashed, but normal people

performing normal activities, they just happened to be activities within social structures and theologies outside of the mainstream 'norm'.

Barker's work marks an interesting point between the giants of the past and the recent focus upon lived religion. Whilst she highlights the importance of *verstehen* (Barker, 1984, 20) and thus sits within an inheritance of classical sociological scholarship, she has applied this concept to radically alter scholarship on contemporary and newly emergent religious movements. As exemplified in *The Making of a Moonie*, Barker's focus on the everyday lived realities of converts to a new religious movement ensured that findings were based upon reflective analysis of lived realities rather than any attempt to fit the religious participants and movement into a predetermined category or framework, as the 'brainwashing' advocates had sought to do. This approach not only fundamentally changed the discipline of the study of new religious movements, but also acts as an example of how starting from a 'bottom-up' approach within the wider study of religion may be the best way to avoid essentialist misrepresentations of the religious 'other'. It is important, however, to note that it is not just minority traditions that are being approached in this way: Davies and Guest's (2007) text *Bishops, Wives and Children: Spiritual Capital Across the Generations* examines how religious traditions are transmitted by Anglican bishops, not through the medium of their rank and hierarchical Church office, but by examining their spiritual relationship with their families. Similarly, with regard to a Hindu movement, the anthropologist Maya Warrier has extensively researched the global, transnational and cross-cultural Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, not with a focus on the institutional operation of the movement, but by seeking to understand those "narrative[s] … shaped by … devotees' experiences of their lived realities" (Warrier, 2009, 2). These are important studies which are not concerned with institutional structures or metanarratives concerning the place of religion in society, but with real people living everyday lives.

The Religious Studies Project

One important resource that brings classic scholarship up to date – by using it, challenging it and developing it – is The Religious Studies Project website. Founded by David Robertson and Christopher Cotter and funded by the British Association for the Study of Religions, the project is an international collaboration of established and emergent scholars which aims to create a lasting repository of cutting-edge debate and a free resource archive for students.

The most helpful section of the project for students is the growing collection of podcasts, featuring interviews, discussions and debates with the world's leading academics of religion. At the time of writing there are over 100 podcasts uploaded, with more added every week, covering topics as diverse as Religion, Spirituality and Health, Religious Education, Fieldwork, Methodology in the Study of Religion and many more.

Sociological, anthropological, psychological and phenomenological approaches to the study of religion are all encompassed within this vast repository.

The podcasts can be accessed here: www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/

Issues of knowledge

All approaches to knowledge operate with a particular *ontology*, *epistemology* and *methodology*. Ontology raises questions about the basic nature of reality, of what *is*, of what reality is like. It is obvious that debates about the existence of God, for example, are ontological. Epistemology is concerned with what there is that can be known, what it means to *know* something and about the relationship between the knower, or would-be knower, and what can be known. Methodology is about the *how* of knowing, the practicalities of getting the knowledge we believe to be there to be discovered. This section focuses on epistemology, and sets out some of the issues involved in thinking about knowing. Approaches to knowledge have changed a lot in the last few centuries but we particularly like a Latin phrase from the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas to sum up the approach we are arguing for here. In Latin it is '*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*' which means, 'What is received is received according to the manner of the receiver'. Perhaps Evans-Pritchard said this best when he stated:

> one may say that since what we study are human beings the study involves the whole personality, heart as well as mind; and therefore what has shaped that personality, and not just academic background: sex, age, class, nationality, family and home, school, church, companions – one could enumerate any number of such influences. All I want to emphasise is that what one brings out of a field-study largely depends on what one brings to it.
>
> (Evans-Pritchard, 1973, 2)

In other words, what I know depends on who I am and how I understand knowing, as well as what might be there to be known. See 'Changing the "Subject" in Religious Studies' (Gregg and Scholefield, 2013) for some extended discussion of these issues.

'Caretaker' vs 'Karma-Yogin'

Of course, when you visit a religious community, it is not just your own perceptions and approaches that will affect the outcome and experience of your research, but also the perceptions and approaches of your host or

guide. This person, often a member of the community in question, plays a vital role in how religion is represented to visitors, and what learning opportunities may arise. This does not refer to the simple fact that some people are better communicators than others, but addresses the methodological approach that is taken by these guides, often unconsciously, which affects their approach to their, often voluntary, duties in helping and guiding students. We label this factor as 'Caretaker' vs 'Karma-Yogin'.

It is apparent that the intimacy generated between visitors and a sacred site or religious community is deepened when the guide is personally undertaking a religious action in engaging with outsiders. The term 'Karma-Yogin' is borrowed from Hindu traditions, where it refers to a devotee who performs a religious duty with no desire for reward. This elevates the individual's role beyond that of a mere guide or caretaker, and means that there is a process of religious action occurring in the interaction with the students. Put simply, the very act of guiding and educating you becomes a religious act for the individual. For example, a swami acting as a guide at a Hindu ashram who talks to you about the practicalities of taking vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in a very human way is an excellent guide. Beyond this, however, the learning experience offered to you is deepened tremendously by the fact that the swami is not performing the role of a sacred tour guide, but is actually performing part of his *dharma*, or religious duty, by undertaking *seva*, or service to humanity, as a practical example of his duty as a karma-yogin. Such action means that you are not just being informed about a religion (simple *reported* or *represented* religion), but are part of the meaning of religious service and identity in the life of the host and guide – a wonderful example of engaging with *living* religious actions.

When you go and visit a religious community or meet and talk with religious people, YOU go. This means that your body, your expectations, your perceptions, your beliefs and ideas, your memories, your emotions, your imagination and your experiences are all involved in what you learn. The Spanish artist Antoni Muntadas, in his powerful work on the various ways in which we can interact with objects and spaces, says, "Warning! Perception Requires Involvement" (Muntadas, 2011, 183). The epistemological approach we take here could be described as *experiential knowledge*. For more on this see *Embodied Enquiry* (Todres, 2007). As Frances, a second-year undergraduate put it, more simply, in her evaluation of a study visit to Jerusalem: 'Fieldwork is amazing. It doesn't just get you thinking but touches your heart.'

This book will help you to get as much as possible out of the fieldwork that you do, to learn as much as possible, to understand how to reflect on what you have experienced and to communicate what you have learned. The questions at the end of the chapters, for example, are designed not only to aid

comprehension of key ideas, but also to provide opportunities to reflect on your experiences and to discuss the issues raised when you engage with living religious people and communities.

Modernist, Enlightenment, empirical approaches to knowing separated the knowing subject, usually male, Western, white and Protestant, from an inanimate object of knowledge. This approach enabled huge progress in science and technology, but it also came to be seen as the only way of knowing. In the twentieth century these limits began to be questioned in many different academic fields, including the social sciences, and epistemology and methodology developed in different ways. Here we will briefly discuss some of the insights of feminist epistemology, which are interesting for fieldwork in the study of religion because they argue for ways of knowing which are relevant to qualitative research – both the planning and work in the field, and the writing up of the data. They also challenge the traditional patriarchal power structures which have distorted the study of religion. We discuss these power issues more fully later in the chapter.

Whilst feminism generally is about affirming the full humanity of all people, the key idea of feminist epistemology is about 'situated knowing'. This means that there is no neutral, objective, impartial perspective on the world; no one can be above all that is happening, just looking on. Everyone sees things from their own situation, or to put it another way, "every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere" (Abu-Lughod, 2006, 155). The men of the Enlightenment treated their views as if they were actually a full, universal and absolute view of reality. But really, this was a very partial view of things which treated as normative, what was actually limited in time and space, and by the perspectives of those claiming to 'know'. As Donna Haraway put it, the problem is:

> how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meaning, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real world', one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.
>
> (Haraway, 1991, 187)

In feminist epistemology, it is important to start with the knower, the one who is generating knowledge, and to recognise that everyone has strengths and limitations, a personal and social story, and approaches a situation, an event, an idea or a place with a number of agendas. Reflexivity is the art of developing a growing awareness and understanding of one's own situation, and responses to what happens in the field. It requires imagination, too, to attempt to understand the 'other', the people and places we are studying. There is also an awareness in some feminist thinking that things are connected, boundaries between self and other can become unsettled in the field, and that relationships

are more important than individual self-determination and freedom of choice. This understanding chimes with many traditional religious views but is in contrast to the late modern Western idea of the autonomous, rational self. In this view religious phenomena will be understood as objects, but feminist approaches, amongst others, encourage a subject-subject, embodied relation with sacred objects, as well as people. Fieldwork, then, is a means of "incarnating subject matter" (Harris, 1991, 41). As Gordon Lynch writes:

> The sedimentation of religious narratives and discourses around particular sacred subjects means that adherents learn to encounter these subjects with the expectation that the sacred other will relate to them in certain ways – as a source of healing, moral challenge, forgiveness, power, hope, blessing and so on.
>
> (Lynch, 2010, 50)

It is also possible that a 'sacred subject', studied in the field, might have 'gifts' for students whether or not they are adherents of a particular faith; they might be opportunities for what one religious studies tutor called 'blessing'.

Although feminist writing, in theology and religious studies or anthropology, began by focusing on the experiences of women in a particular situation, attention soon shifted to *gender* as a category of analysis – see the website 'Feminism and Religion'. Part of this involves trying to understand how the body connects with various forces in religious and spiritual cultures. A more recent development in thinking about ways to interpret the world is Queer Theory, which problematises more traditional understandings of sex and gender, introduces ideas about identity as performance, and is interested in the transgression of boundaries – see *Gender Trouble* (Judith Butler, 1990) for an influential introduction to this field, especially her discussion about the performative nature of identity. These ideas are all relevant to theory and theorising about religion in the field. If identity is formed and reformed through performance, this gives us an interesting way of exploring ritual, and participation in various religious and spiritual activities – see, for example, *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* (Isherwood and Jordan, 2010). In fact, Queer Theory is becoming a very important part of the contemporary study of religion, as it helps us to change the way in which we approach the very subject we study. As Nynäs and Yip have noted, critiquing accepted notions of 'what religion is' by Queering our object(s) of study is vital as it changes "how we approach religion, what we highlight, include and exclude … the private and the public, and the sacred and the secular" (Nynäs and Yip, 2012, 5).

Ritual

Ritual is a phenomenon that is frequently written about by scholars of religion, and there are many theoretical ways of understanding its meaning. Ritual can be seen as 'acting out' and symbolically expressing stories

and ideas about the way the world began, what it means to be human and other major aspects of understanding reality. You can also consider rituals to be more about establishing and reinforcing particular social relations. Another way to approach rituals is as performance, a kind of theatre. This raises the issue which this whole book is addressing in different ways: how to understand the experiences and role of whoever is observing the ritual. The term 'participant observer' is used to indicate that there is a tension or a continuum between being a participant in ritual and being an observer. Studying religion in the field inevitably involves one in this process. For example, Tibetan monks perform a dance called Cham in a theatre in London, watched by a range of people, few, if any, of whom are Buddhists. However, this is not simply a piece of theatre, because, according to the beliefs of the dancing monks, just seeing the dance means that the audience will never be reborn in the hell realms, and so, the dance is partly performed for the audience's existential benefit. Having observed the dance, things are no longer the same because the ritual has both symbolised and actualised the change of status.

Observing religion in the field is a real reminder that *belief* is not a sufficient category to characterise religion. As David Morgan writes about the more complex range of practices which need to be considered:

> Their embodied forms of practice such as prayer, liturgy, and pilgrimage, their sensations of sound in corporate worship, their visual articulations of sacred writ, their creation of spaces that sculpt sound and shape living architectures of human bodies – all these vastly exceed the narrow idea of a religion as the profession of creeds or catechetical formulae singularly understood to represent an inner state of volition.
>
> (Morgan, 2010a, 2–3)

To put this another way, we are encouraging you not to think in dualistic terms of separate mind and body. Researchers need to bring their whole self to the fieldwork and to be aware of the mind/body forms of how people express their religion. A well-known example of this is the amazing statue *The Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila* by Bernini, which is in a chapel in the Santa Maria della Vittoria church in Rome. Teresa wrote about her experiences in words that also express the inseparable nature of body and soul or mind. Or to put it another way, beliefs do not just exist in some dislocated mental space. Beliefs also have a social location (Day, 2011, 193).

Social trends and religion

There are numerous websites which are helpful for students in analysing and evaluating social trends in religion, and religion's place in society.

Here are some sites, which each give valuable contextualising information with regards to how religion operates in contemporary societies in specific social and political contexts:

PewResearch – this research centre focuses on religion within North American society, as well as large-scale, global-trend research projects. Particularly helpful for membership and attendance statistics, together with summaries of religious adherents' views on moral and ethical debates.

Religion and Society Project – the outcome of the UK's largest ever collaborative research project on religion within contemporary society, and the portal to access over seventy university-led projects from a £13 million initiative, this site provides access to research on topics as wide ranging as religious discrimination and Muslim-inspired modest fashion trends. The project is also linked to the Westminster Faith Debates, which are useful public forums on religious issues debated by politicians and public thinkers.

British Religion in Numbers – this portal has a searchable database which utilises government data, opinion polls, and faith community directories to provide an easy-access source of information for students asking quantitative questions regarding religious communities within the UK.

The Pluralism Project – Harvard University's ongoing research project (founded in 1991) seeks to map the changing landscape of American religious identity and community, and their website contains a rich variety of data and scholarship easily accessible for students.

Institute for Jewish Policy Research – Sometimes, it is useful to access tradition-specific data repositories, of which this is a good example. This institute publishes the results of major quantitative research into British Jewry.

In addition to the above, national census websites are invaluable sources of information on changing social trends in religious identity. Here are some relevant sources of information:

Australia: www.abs.gov.au/census
Canada: www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm
New Zealand: www.stats.govt.nz/Census.aspx
United Kingdom: www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/uk-census/index.html

NB The census of the United States has not included a religion question since the 1950s, but the government has conducted some separate research. This can be found here: www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/population/religion.html

Relational issues

One of the major methodological issues within the study of religion(s) is the relationship between the researchers and the subject they are researching. Questions such as 'Do Catholics have insights into Catholic communities that a non-Catholic couldn't have?' or 'Do agnostics approach religions more even-handedly than atheists?' may have been asked in a previous generation of scholarship. Traditionally within the study of religion, insider/outsider discourse, as this subject has become known, has focused on the seemingly dualistic notion that one is either a member, or not a member, of a given worldview or religious community, and that questions can be asked about the approaches of people who fit on either side of this divide. Indeed, so powerful has this model been within the discipline that perhaps the most influential approach to the study of religion in the twentieth century, phenomenology, has often been applied at undergraduate level in a way which may be seen to support binary notions of 'inside' and 'outside' – namely, Ninian Smart's famous challenge not to judge someone "until you have walked a mile in their moccasins" (Smart, 1998, 11). Importantly, we say 'may' here as a reflective approach to Smart's practical suggestion leaves important room for an understanding of our relationality and connection. By asking you to walk in the steps of someone else, you are being challenged to deliberately empathise with another human being – as a subject, not an object. This approach may well be helpful as a way of breaking down insider/outsider binaries, as it highlights the view that the more one understands of oneself, the more one is able to begin to understand another, without reverting to simple prejudging. Cox, in his exposition of phenomenology, outlines the importance of this practice – technically referred to as 'epoché' – arguing that this sympathetic approach allows us to understand what we are studying from the viewpoint of our subjects (Cox, 2010, 48–72).

Such developments in our understanding of the imagined boundaries between identities and worldviews are supported by Arvind Sharma, who has contested simplistic conceptions of belonging, particularly with regard to Hindu identity, arguing that dualistic conceptions of religion, where one is either 'inside' or 'outside', are unhelpful as it makes religion a unilateral category of participation, which is seen as separate from understandings of culture (2008, 23). This is a powerful argument, which applies to different traditions, not just Hindu traditions – contemporary phenomena about merged religious identities have given rise to JuBus (Jewish Buddhists), JeWitches (Jewish Witches), Qagans (Quaker Pagans), HinJews (Hindus and Jews) and many other relational religious identities.

Similarly, contemporary political developments in Europe have led to interesting examples of communities challenging monolithic categories of religious belonging, even if the laws of the countries involved may not have caught up yet. One example, from the time of writing this book, is a protest by hundreds of Icelandic liberals who have applied to become members of Iceland's national Muslim Association. Their actions are intended as a display of solidarity with

the small number of other Muslim citizens, of whom there are only 770 registered at present, and were triggered by the recent denial of planning permission for a mosque to be built in the capital city, Reykjavik. This is more than a simple act of online protest such as putting one's name to a petition, however, as Icelandic law only allows a person to register as a member of one religious group at a time – in other words, someone's religious identity can only fit into the narrow categories of Icelandic legislation. Of course, what is particularly interesting about this case is that the individuals involved almost certainly have not incorporated ritualistic aspects of Muslim living, or contemplated divine will or the revelation of the Qur'an, but have acted upon core values of liberalism, multiculturalism, individual rights and freedom of religion, which underpin their everyday lives, to find common ground with fellow Icelanders who happen to be defined as belonging to a different religion – their relational identity has great areas of overlap which are not sufficiently explained by describing someone as 'Muslim' or 'not Muslim'. Such an example serves to show us that people's relational identities within, and between, the labels applied by the scholarship of generations past – and the laws based upon such labels – are not sufficiently nuanced for our contemporary networked inter-relational world; identities should be thought of as overlapping Venn diagrams, not boxed-off or separable categories.

When we approach living religion, then, it is clear that binary models of belonging – where one is either a thing or not a thing, a member or not a member, a believer or not a believer – are no longer fit for purpose. Instead, we need to understand that there is a continuum of belonging, often complicated and messy, but which can do greater service to the models of religious identity which real people enact within their daily lives. Of course, this also applies to the relationship between neophyte researchers and their host community, as well as religious participants themselves, and such a continuum must take into account numerous factors.

No individual is ever a complete outsider to a worldview, but has a relational understanding of convergent concepts, categories, practices and thought systems. As Cohen (1985) has argued, a sense of identity is symbolically constructed *in relation* to other symbolic constructions of identity by third parties. Issues such as gender, sexual orientation, language, class, philosophical worldview, political views and moral standpoints will all hugely impact upon an individual's relational identity with a diversity of religious traditions, all of which critiques notions of 'insideness' or 'outsideness'. For example, it is perfectly sensible to label members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church), commonly known as Mormons, as Christians. They self-identify as such, focus on the person of Christ in their theology and use the Bible, as well as the Book of Mormon, as the basis of their teachings and communal identity. However, the World Council of Churches – a transnational Christian ecumenical organisation – has consistently rejected Mormon applications to join. The situation is equally complicated for the scholar approaching Mormonism – if you are Christian, does this mean you are an 'insider' to a wider community

and sense of commitment to Jesus Christ which means that you would find it easier to speak with LDS Church members, or would the fact that your theologies diverge make it even more difficult for you? Similarly, perhaps someone who believes in a god – perhaps a Jew – may have more empathy for another person who also believes in a monotheistic deity – perhaps a Muslim – even if they have major differences of opinion on other matters, than they would have for an atheist, polytheist or animist. Likewise, perhaps left-wing Catholics have more in common with left-wing Buddhists than they do with right-wing fellow Catholics when it comes to issues of social justice which affect how they negotiate their daily lives.

Such examples highlight how simple inside or outside labels are increasingly unhelpful – we suggest that in any reflective work you write on religious communities, an important part of that work is to position yourself in relation to the community in question, to help to contextualise your approach, and we will develop this theme in chapters 4 and 5.

Issues of power

Despite the protestations of our elected politicians, there can be no doubt that we still live in a world full of colonialism. Global music is predominantly influenced by America, fashion has its 'capitals' in London, Paris and New York, 'Western' sports such as football (soccer) and cricket are played more widely across the globe than any other sports, English is the international language of air travel, Arab states are modelling their schools, colleges and universities (and the inspection regimes that help them to develop) on European models, and if you turn on MTV in New Delhi, you will be met with smiling pale-faced Indians, dressed in 'Western' clothes who are hardly representative of their Dravidian heritage brother and sister South Indians. Perhaps the major economic powers of the world may be post-empire, but we hardly live in a post-colonial world. These are examples of how power, and the discourse of power, is a crucial factor in our understanding of contemporary social phenomena. This is particularly the case when it comes to studying religion.

The most obvious way in which this power dynamic has played out in the study of religion is in the preferential treatment that Christianity has received within the Academy. Whilst there may be theological reasons for this heritage, the problem arises that religious traditions and activities have often been (mis) understood through a lens of Christianity. Or more precisely, traditions have been (mis)understood against an essentialised vision of 'normative' Christianity. This is important, as this bad old 'comparative' religion – which uses a yardstick against which to compare, contrast and analyse a variety of religious phenomena – is as equally unhelpful for exploring living Christianity as it is for exploring other religious systems and experiences. For this reason, whenever we teach students about different religious traditions, we always insist that they use terminology and examples from the traditions in question – for example, we do not encourage students to translate *dharma,* a Sanskrit word

often *mis*translated as 'duty' (it means so much more, including concepts of individual responsibility, social justice and cosmic balance). Instead, use the term *dharma* and understand it within specific Indian contexts – which for a full understanding of the term needs to incorporate personal, social and cosmological nuances of the concept. Likewise, when you engage with living religions, do not compartmentalise them into neat comparable categories; such neat academic boxes are often more misleading than helpful. Despite this, the history of our discipline is littered with examples of power dynamics affecting our approach to religion, which in turn has affected how people have approached religious communities and even the concept of religion itself.

Perhaps the most problematic issue has been the preference that has been given to texts, and their role in the history of our discipline. In the nineteenth century, the rise of biblical criticism in British, French and German universities introduced new ways of looking at 'sacred scriptures' – they were opportunities to engage with the records of human communities' religious experiences, and/or the relationship between the divine and the human. The rise of archaeology, geology, biology and other associated sciences and methodologies challenged and tested received notions of scriptural inerrancy, but this process of change must be understood in a post-Reformation landscape.

The Reformation had reorientated Christian worship across large parts of Europe to a concentration on the Bible as 'the Word' of God. Pulpits, used for reading and preaching from the Bible, became central to churches, as 'the Word', physically and purposefully, became the focus of attention and the defining point of Christian identity and practice. The inheritance of these historical shifts can still be seen. For example, the removal of church decorations, some often violently, is clearly visible on the outside of the western facade of Wells Cathedral, one of the masterpieces of European medieval architecture. The carved stone statues at the bottom of the facade have all been smashed or decapitated. The higher ones survived as the attackers must have simply destroyed what they could reach. Similarly, the scriptural literalism, often highlighted most popularly by the media when it comes to the 'Young Earth Creationist' Christians of the Southern States of the USA, only makes sense in a post-Reformation understanding of scripture and would have made little sense to earlier communities of Christians in medieval Europe.

The academic inheritance of this is that when universities in the nineteenth century began to examine religions other than Christianity, they first looked at texts, bringing with them the assumption that texts were central to all religious knowledge and identity as they believed they were for Christianity. This led to a concentration on, for example the Vedas for Hinduism and the Pali Canon for Buddhism, rather than the actual lived experience of Hindus and Buddhists. The texts of all religious traditions came to be seen as normative for that tradition, whereas they actually represent the recorded religious expression of a tiny minority of an elite class of men (almost always men). In addition, the texts are often in languages that are no longer spoken by ordinary members of the tradition, creating a further 'gap' between the

reception of the text and the everyday realities, experience and knowledge of communities.

Within the development of the study of religion, much of this has been related to the discussion on 'Orientalism'. Put simply, this has been the process whereby 'foreign' or 'strange' cultural systems were 'othered' by the people studying them, thus seeing them as 'not normal' or 'strange' when compared to the scholars' own cultural systems. Perhaps confusingly, this problem can also occur even when scholars are seeking to be positive about cultures and traditions; we will explore this below, but it is important to note that the issue here isn't in being critical, any more than it is in being praising, but in *mis*representing what we are studying. An example here is what has happened in the post-war Christian rediscovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity. Biblical scholars always used to talk and write about the Old Testament, but wanting to recognise that both Jews and Christians see these books as revealed scripture, scholars have taken to referring to them as the 'Hebrew Scriptures' because they were originally written in Hebrew. They were trying to find a neutral term that did not make exclusively Christian claims for these texts. However, a result of this has been the suggestion (misunderstanding) that there is no difference between the Jewish and Christian texts, and that is deeply mistaken. The order of the books is different, which affects the meaning and understanding of the whole, and the ways in which the texts are interpreted are completely different. They are not experienced in the same way in worship or in study. Becoming aware of the ways in which these texts are used in the living religions needs to be part of the way in which they are studied at universities.

A scholar who has worked extensively in this area is Richard King (1999), whose important text *Orientalism and Religion* provides an often damning critique of how scholarship in 'Western' universities from the nineteenth century onwards has essentialised religion in the 'East' by utilising post-Enlightenment models of religion which do not culturally transfer beyond a European context. It is important to remember, however, that approaches such as King's, a complex and deep text, which seek to map a critical historical narrative on the history of the study of religions, are supported by numerous examples that students will come across in their normal studies. Flood, in his highly accessible *An Introduction to Hinduism*, notes that the great Hindu 'reformers' such as Rammohan Roy, who in the nineteenth century sought to change popular Hindu ritual away from *murti* (image) worship, were representing a form of Hinduism that was far removed from the popular practices of village-based Hinduism (Flood, 1996, 254). However, this elite form of Hinduism, which sees a direct chain of influence from Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda, Gandhi and late into the twentieth century with Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, was prioritised by Western scholars who saw their form(s) of Neo-Vedanta as the form of Hinduism *par excellence*. This perpetuated misleading narratives concerning contemporary realities of how Hindu traditions are lived and performed.

Much recent scholarship has sought to redress such imbalances, and one helpful approach is Lynn Foulston's (1999) *At the Feet of the Goddess*, which is an ethnographic study of two goddess communities in India that analyses both the ritual and practice of devotees, and also explores origin myths with links to textual traditions. What is particularly helpful about this approach is that it does not start with the elite source of texts, but does not discount them either – it understands the use and interpretation of texts in everyday practice in specific and localised communities. This is an important example of starting from a bottom-up approach to how religion is performed as an everyday reality. Similarly, with regard to Islam, Carl Ernst (2004) has traced the Protestant Orientalist projection of what he calls the 'scripturalist fallacy' approach to religion in his *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. There is now a growing literature based around everyday religious experiences of Islam, including Zine's (2008) work on religious identity in Muslim schools which uses interviews with female pupils as its starting point, as opposed to the 'official' line of the patriarchal hierarchies of school management.

Such de-essentialising approaches are vital to the development of the study of religion in very specific contexts, which helps to avoid oversimplification or misrepresentation of often very diverse traditions. More than this, however, understanding that religion must be approached within a social context also means taking into account the power dynamics that affect assumptions that often lie behind these social and political contexts. This is important as it can change the very subject that underpins everything scholars of religion study – that is, the very definition of 'what religion is'. Harvey (2013) has recently used the example of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) to critique received definitions and categories of religion in the contemporary West. FSM has been defined by Cusack as a protest religion akin to other third-millennium invented religions such as Jediism and Matrixism (Cusack, 2010, 113–40), and has its origins in a satirical protest letter written by Bobby Henderson to the Kansas School Board which objected to the teaching of evolution without the 'balancing' narrative of the intelligent design creationism of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which he argued was his deity of choice. Of course, this was a protest aimed at American Young Earth Creationists, who Henderson (2006) was worried were harming scientific learning in the classroom, but the movement has taken off as a religious organisation with a priesthood, holy text, complex mythological history, holiday calendar and ethical framework, including public pronouncements on high-profile moral issues such as same-sex marriage (www.venganza.org).

Cusack argues that FSM has become, even if it was not Henderson's original intention, an "aggressive culture-jamming … rebellion against the materialist, spectaculist culture of the late modern West … [a] religion of resistance … [which] upholds Enlightenment rationality and scientific objectivity on the one hand, while making possible the instantiation of the FSM as the deity … on the other" (Cusack, 2010, 140). However, as fascinating as the development of FSM has been, it is the shape of this development which is of most relevance to our

current discussion. Indeed, Harvey has noted that the FSM only makes sense as a protest, satirical or rebellious religion if we accept Protestant theological definitions of what 'religions are', stating that the whole FSM project "reveals common assumptions about how religion might be defined: religions are popularly supposed to have transcendent but self-revealing deities, texts, cosmologies, rituals, hierarchies, and probably a degree of hypocrisy" (Harvey, 2013, 62). For Harvey, therefore, FSM is a protest religion by numbers – a construction of a religious phenomenon within a tightly defined cultural assumption which is clear about what religions are, and how religions operate.

Such assumptions about 'what religion is', based on these culturally inherited power discourses which define or produce a standard against which 'other' traditions are judged, are not just an issue for invented or parody religions – issues as important as the very laws of countries and the human rights afforded to people within them are affected by such inherited assumptions. One such example is the current debate, particularly amongst Pentecostals and Anglicans, surrounding homosexuality and Christianity in Africa. Public rhetoric by anti-gay campaigners has often focused on an argument that homosexual relationships are 'un-African', as if it were somehow indigenous to an archaic and deeply embedded African worldview or culture to be intolerant to diverse adult sexualities. The problem with this position is that the current church teachings, and indeed the very laws which cover same-sex rights, which the campaigners have used and reified, are themselves products of nineteenth-century colonial church attitudes and legal changes, which were distinctly un-African in that they were imposed upon a colonised people by an external dominant colonial power – often the British. Caution of course must be noted so that the power dynamics at play in these historical, political and religious contexts are not oversimplified, but using this example serves to highlight that rigid definitions of 'what religion is' and 'how it operates in society' are complicated by local and historical factors which still create social problems in the twenty-first century.

A further example is the treatment of many new religious movements in northern Europe in recent years – particularly within a French context. Palmer has written extensively about the 'Secte panic' that gripped France in the early 1990s, outlawing and demonising many alternative religious communities. As she has stated: "France is remarkable for its unique and paradoxical form of intolerance toward religious minorities. France's constitutional guidelines clearly offer protection for freedom of religion … [but] intolerant attitudes … have been gradually institutionalized." (Palmer, 2011, 3) Importantly, Palmer goes on to say: "Since the lay [French] state does not recognize any religion, it is theoretically impossible, either legally or philosophically, for the state to distinguish 'real' religions from 'fake' ones, exactly what the state has been trying to do since 1995" (2011, 4). In our current discussion, it is perhaps more helpful to use the terms 'normative'/'non-normative' rather than 'real'/'fake', but Palmer makes a crucial point in her observation of the French government's treatment of religious minorities, highlighting that the large anti-cult movement has its

origins in the Roman Catholic Church within France. Indeed, as Gregg (2012) has previously noted, the Roman Catholic Church is still the majority cultural identity driver for some major new religious movements in France, and it is not surprising that a nominally secular government still relates to Catholic-informed conceptions of religion, given the history of Catholicism in Western Europe. It is possible that small shifts are occurring with regard to conceptions of religion in court cases, however, and one interesting example comes from the UK concerning the Church of Scientology.

Scientology is a complicated movement which operates under a number of transnational organisations and structures, including the Religious Technology Center and the International Association of Scientologists, but which has radically different legal standing in different countries across the world, which leads to a huge diversity of lived experience for Scientologists in different contexts. Put simply, the lived religious experience of a Scientologist in Bavaria, Germany, will be far removed from the experience of a Scientologist in Florida, USA. Much of the diversity of approach towards Scientology is based on pre-existing cultural attitudes towards 'what religion is', which has affected subsequent court decisions regarding the legal status of the organisation.

Within the UK, Scientology was denied charitable status – and thus the social and financial benefits that come with this – in a Charity Commission (1999) ruling. The judgement was based upon the conclusion that the "core practices of Scientology, being auditing and training, do not constitute worship as they do not display the essential characteristic of reverence or veneration for a supreme being" (1999, 2a) and that "public benefit arising from the practice of Scientology and/or the purposes of [the Church of Scientology] had not been established" (1999, 2c). It should be clear that this judgement essentialises 'what religion is' within a very narrow Protestant theological definition, and does not respond to the lived realities of religion in contemporary society. Of course, it was always likely that such a challenge to Scientology's social legitimacy would come, and this has indeed been the case. A direct consequence of this ruling on the everyday lives of Scientologists was that they could not be legally married in their churches, as they were not recognised as places of worship under English law.

In December 2013 a Supreme Court ruling was made in the case of a British Scientologist couple who sought to marry at a London Church of Scientology. In an important ruling for the place of religion in UK society, the Supreme Court found in the Scientologist's favour stating that "religion should not be confined to religions which recognise a supreme deity" (Supreme Court, 2013, 51) and that "Scientologists do believe in a supreme deity of a kind, but of an abstract and impersonal nature" (2013, 52) and that, due to these factors, Scientology churches should be recognised as places of worship. Interestingly, the ruling accepted that "there has never been a universal legal definition of religion in English law" (2013, 34) but focused upon conceptions of deity or ultimate reality and, crucially, delivered a verdict that clearly still understood 'religion' in the context of a "belief system" (2013, 57). Although it can be

observed that the Supreme Court ruling helped to modernise understandings of religion in contemporary society – with particular impact upon understandings of some aspects of Hindu and Buddhist traditions – the power dynamics of inherited social capital and assumptions about religion emergent from England's religious past are still clearly visible in the decision.

So, if we are to explore religions in very localised contexts, appreciating the wider power dynamics that impact upon both their own development and identity and our relationship with them and our approach to studying them, how can we best manage the problems that this creates? One way for neophyte researchers to negotiate these power dynamics skilfully is to ensure that writing and reflection on religious communities does not revert to statements such as 'Hindus believe that … '. Not only is this an essentialising approach, it focuses on an abstract notion of belief, whereas it is so much more helpful to focus on how people act – acts which may well be informed by a notion of belief – rather than what they say they believe. Beliefs are useful to understand as contextualising information on how such beliefs guide people to act – they cannot, in themselves, be studied. Malinowski, who we introduced earlier, acknowledged this important point when he differentiated between the 'norms' and 'activities' of a community. The 'norms' were the *expectations* of the group – how they publicly presented their social behaviours to outsiders. The 'activities' of a group, however, were of much more interest to the scholar, for these are the *actual* social behaviours that occurred in a social group. These may or may not live up to the expectations of the 'norms' (Parsons, 2002). In this book, we have introduced our concepts of 'represented religion' and 'lived religion' – these can be seen to build upon Malinowski's categories of 'norms' and 'activities' – and investigating the 'lived' realities of religious communities is the best way of understanding communities in everyday life – how they actually are, rather than how they are believed to be.

This focus upon lived, rather than represented, religion means that it is important to understand voices from within traditions from the ground up – congregants as well as archbishops, devotees as well as gurus. In so doing, we challenge accepted issues of 'authority' in religion and question whose voices we should be listening to. Sometimes such issues are codified within the identity of traditions – for example, within Orthodox Jewish communities, rabbis are expected to have authoritative voices concerning *halakhic* (religious law) matters; within Sikhism, after 1699, the Khalsa movement has sought to 'speak for' Sikhism. However, in the modern world, such issues of authority are being challenged. Linda Woodhead's recent research on the ethical stance of Catholic congregations in the UK shows a massive difference between congregants – who are more liberal – and clergy and Church leaders – who are more conservative (Woodhead, 2013). When we speak of 'Catholic attitudes' towards a certain issue, what then are we really speaking of? In generations past, textbooks would invariably refer to Church teachings such as Council documents, papal encyclicals and other formal documents, but if such teachings are now in some ways removed from the lived realities of Catholics, how can they represent how

Catholics actually believe and act? Again, we return to the issue of everyday lived religious experience as an authoritative and authentic way of engaging with religion as a social phenomenon.

Finally, in this discussion about the different power dynamics that affect our approach to the study of religion, it is helpful to remember that these hierarchical influences are not just the stuff of history – they continue in the present. One simple example will suffice. Earlier in this section, we mentioned the problem of 'elite' languages creating a dissonance between everyday religious participants and the texts which have been, to date, preferenced as authoritative in much scholarship. It is essential to recognise, however, that this is not just an issue of early Bronze Age Indians not relating to Sanskrit, or medieval Catholics not understanding the spoken words of the Latin Mass. Contemporary religious texts and ceremonies are often written or performed in languages outside the use of everyday people; in contemporary Britain, Canada and Germany, for example, many Sikhs do not understand Punjabi beyond ritual use, and across the world, from Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Turkey and across Europe, America and Australasia, Muslims often do not use Arabic in everyday discourse. These are not value judgements, of course, but observations that if we highlight scholarly linguistic exegesis of the Guru Granth Sahib or the Qur'an as somehow being representative of what Sikhism or Islam are, then we fall into the essentialising traps of the past by failing to engage with how the texts are actually used by hundreds of millions of religious adherents within vibrant and diverse religious communities today.

Complicating issues

One of the things that anyone studying religion in the field has to consider is how to deal with aspects of religion that challenge you, surprise you, or perhaps even offend you. What do we really mean by 'respect' for others' belief and practice, and how do we respond to unexpected or challenging issues which complicate our experiences when engaging with individuals and communities?

"I don't believe in owt"

The research for a very interesting book on belief in Britain was stimulated by an interview with a 14-year-old boy:

> I began my interview with Jordan by asking him my first question to which he replied in Yorkshire dialect, using 'nowt' for 'nothing' and 'owt' for 'anything'.

ABBY: What do you believe in?
JORDAN: Nowt.
ABBY: Sorry?
JORDAN: I don't believe in owt. I don't believe in any religions.

> ABBY: You don't believe in any religions.
> JORDAN: No. I'm Christian but I don't believe in owt.
>
> As a product of a certain historical era, and one raised in a church-attending family, it was initially difficult for me to account for Jordan and the many other 'anomalies' I was to meet in my research. It was sometimes my own emotional and cognitive response to interviews that showed me I had entered difficult, and therefore potentially fruitful, territory.
>
> (Day, 2011, 29)

If we are to engage with living religion then we have to take people's beliefs and actions *seriously* whatever our immediate response to them is. There is no need to agree with, or to approve, in order to seek to understand others. What is important is to be aware of our responses, and these skills of reflexivity are much more fully discussed in chapter 5. When you go on a visit or meet with religious people you take your whole self with you, which includes critical as well as respectful aspects. This is often very hard to do if we encounter challenging worldviews that make us uncomfortable or that contradict our presuppositions or expectations.

One scholar that we have found very useful when approaching these issues is Susan Palmer. In her work with the Nuwaubian Nation of Moors (2011), she has faced the issue of being a white female academic investigating a black patriarchal religious movement. To overcome this seemingly huge obstacle, she uses the term 'overstanding', which is borrowed from Rastafari traditions, to describe the way in which scholars can best negotiate these difficulties. Put simply, to 'understand' something is to view something from your own position – looking up at your subject with the limited view that that offers. To 'overstand' something is to view something from the position of your host community, and this allows a much wider field of view and context. Such an approach builds on the relational role scholars have with their communities of study, and helps to engage with everyday lived realities. This is important, Martin Stringer reminds us, as "for most people, 'religion' is situational and often contradictory" (Stringer, 2011, 51).

An important element of this is aspects of religion that we find discomforting or personally challenging. Here is one example of such an occasion, which reflects upon an experience engaging with religion in the field:

> Standing on a hill, at Pashupatinath, just outside Kathmandu in Nepal, we watched as families brought bodies to be burned and then cast the ashes into the Bagmati River, although actually it was only a stream at the time. It was a vivid reminder that we all die. It also posed some questions. Should we have been watching at all? This was an intimate occasion of grief, and would we like tourists coming to see the funeral of our loved

ones? What about taking photographs? Was it okay to watch but not okay to take pictures even if they were going to be used for teaching? What about the photos and videos of such events already on the Internet? Did that make it acceptable to have our cameras? Why do so many tourists come here to view such rituals?

A few days later and we were waiting to go up the mountain to the Manakamana Temple. So were hundreds of other people, in their best clothes, excited to be making this important pilgrimage. We go up, six at a time, in a cable car – the only one in Nepal – and arrive just below the village with the temple. The views of the valley below are amazing. The main street is lined with stalls selling food, clothes, games, flags and souvenirs. The temple is dedicated to the Goddess Bhagwati, the wish-fulfilling deity, and many of the pilgrims have come to make a sacrifice; the goats and birds that came up the mountain cable car in separate containers are collected at the top and brought up the hill to the temple. There they will be killed, although as non-Hindus we can only watch from the square as the queues into the temple build up and the dead animals are brought out to various restaurants to be cooked and eaten. Some of our fellow travellers are indignant that animal sacrifice should be allowed. "It's cruel", "It's primitive", they say. Perhaps, but it is also powerful, uncomfortable, compelling, a ritual that very definitely changes something, that takes us, for a while, into another world. Going back down in the cable car, the Nepalese woman sitting opposite us is sick into a paper bag.

Such an experience is complicated and difficult to express in academic writing, but serves as a useful example of how researchers need to react to difficult situations, and reflect upon unexpected events to contextualise lived religious experience in specific contexts. One such context is the contested territory of the West Bank. The following text box gives two further examples of complicating issues which affected how we, and our students, engaged with religious communities and identities as they were represented to us on recent study tours, which included a visit to Bethlehem University.

Reflections on 'complicating issues' in Bethlehem

Lynne: We were visiting students and staff at Bethlehem University. After lunch they took us up onto the roof to look at the views, and they pointed out the Dheisheh refugee camp where some of the students live. We had visited there earlier in the day. I had been thinking about that experience and I quietly asked one of the staff whether it really needed to still exist, more than sixty years after Palestinians left their homes in what became Israel and fled to the territory then occupied by Jordan. The West Bank was taken over by Israel in 1967 and Bethlehem has been under the administration of the Palestine National Authority since 1995. This person agreed that really there was no practical reason to still have a

camp. This isn't the place to explore the other reasons why it is there. What interests us here is the hunch that what he said to me isn't part of the usual discourse at the University about the camp. I am sure that if the question had been asked in a big group I would have got a different answer. I was staff and so, perhaps, did not need to get only the official line. Would he have talked in the same way to a student? I don't know, but it complicates things. Black and white issues become grey.

Stephen: On my first visit to the University, I was interested to know how the campus catered for its diversity of students. Although the University is a Catholic foundation, over 70 per cent of its students are Muslim. As such, after our initial campus tour, which centred on a welcome by the University Chaplain in the University Chapel, I asked one of our student guides if I could see the Muslim prayer room. This seemed rather straightforward to me, as I had just seen the worship space for Christian students, and so wanted to balance this experience with knowledge about facilities for the (majority) Muslim students. The response I got surprised me. The student, a mature man in his late twenties, looked aghast at my request saying, "You don't need to see it, it's just a plain room". I politely repeated that, nonetheless, I would be very interested to see the part of campus that Muslim students used for formal prayers. At this point, our guide spoke in hushed tones with his fellow students and again tried to talk me out of my request. Eventually, the student took me to a sports hall and said, "This is where they meet on Fridays." As I looked into the nondescript space, I am not sure who was more uncomfortable – me, or the group of covered Muslim female undergraduates who were sheepishly playing volleyball until we entered the room. As we left, the student told me that "we are a Christian University, we couldn't have something like a mosque here". The University is proud of its mixed student demographic, and is rightly lauded for much community work in a troubled part of the world. Such a stance was complicated for me, by my experience of the everyday realities of attitudes towards 'non-Christian' students.

Such issues highlight the importance of engagement with bottom-up religion; the lived realities of daily life for religious adherents, and the ways in which this informs the projection of religious identities. They also highlight one way of understanding how religious communities find and make meaning in their individual and communal lives by demonstrating the importance of etiquette in relational living – what is said, what is done, how it is said and done, and within what strict parameters. Recently, Harvey (2013, 111ff.) has linked this to Polynesian notions of *Tapu* – the relational aspect of negotiating meaning and conduct in our daily lives, which may well sit at the heart of a useful understanding of 'what religion is'. The negotiated and contested spaces, identities and discourses between different religious communities in Bethlehem

demonstrate how the art of performing religious identities is played out within carefully constructed communal boundaries of what is or is not expected, what is or is not acceptable, within very specific and evolving limits.

To transfer this theory into practice when engaged with living religious communities, we need to understand the transformative role of personal relationships with our host communities, to appreciate we are doing more than just transferring knowledge when we engage with individuals, and to ensure that we always seek to understand (or, indeed, to 'overstand') people and societies with whom we are privileged to share time.

Issues of writing and reflection

In chapter 5, on doing independent fieldwork, there is a section on the more practical aspects of writing up fieldwork. What we do here is to discuss some developments in thinking about and in the practice of writing up the results of qualitative research. Since we are no longer thinking about objective knowledge produced by some neutral and anonymous researcher, but rather, understanding what we do as some form of subject-subject, embodied and reflective process, then it obviously makes sense to approach the writing part of the research differently too. We could go as far as saying that how we write is part of how we know.

When you are thinking about how to do fieldwork, it is helpful to use the ideas of the education writer Elliot Eisner. He uses two key terms, *connoisseurship* and *criticism* to explore ways of understanding something: "Connoisseurship is the art of appreciation. It can be displayed in any realm in which the character, import or value of objects, situations, performances is distributed and variable" (Eisner, 1998, 63). Someone who is a wine connoisseur can tell a great deal from the look, smell and taste of a glass of wine. The more one understands about wine, the more one can discern. Similarly, an art connoisseur, looking at a painting or sculpture, can 'read' a lot in the work of art; they have developed the ability to 'see' deeply. So, in doing fieldwork in the study of religion, you have to learn to be a connoisseur. You have to practise because the more, different places you visit, the better. You also have to research as much as possible both before and after a visit. Eisner's idea of connoisseurship is about being able to 'see', not just to 'look', just as we discussed in the section on issues of knowledge above. It involves:

> the ability to name and appreciate the different dimensions of situations and experiences, and the way they relate to one another. We have to be able to draw upon, and make use of, a wide array of information. We also have to be able to place our experiences and understanding in a wider context, and connect them with our values and commitments. Connoisseurship is something that needs to be worked at – but it is not a technical exercise. The bringing together of the different elements into a whole, involves artistry.
>
> (Smith, 2005)

If connoisseurship is about seeing as fully as possible, then criticism is about communicating what you see so that someone else can see it too. If you read an article by an art critic and look at the painting he or she is writing about, your perceptions should be enhanced, you should see more because of what you read; it should evoke insight and understanding and it should help shape your future perception of a work of art. You may not agree with the criticism but you ought to be able to see what it is getting at. This is the kind of writing we want to encourage you to produce – writing which evokes something of the qualities and nature of the living religion you have engaged with in the field and the understanding you have developed as a result of your experiences. So, begin to think about how you could write 'criticism' about your experiences in the field. The text box below gives an example of the kind of vivid and interesting writing which can be done.

Ghosts of Spain

Read the following extract from *Ghosts of Spain* (Tremlett, 2012, 362–68). It is a very good example of 'thick description' together with comments and wider connections made by the author. Notice the concrete, vivid language which brings the occasion alive so that the reader can imagine just what is happening and what it is like.

> I met Manuel standing beside his coffin. The long, wooden box, lined with quilted, padded white viscose, was standing upright, leaning against the wall of the church at Santa Marta de Ribarteme (in Galicia, Spain). Manuel and four friends were standing beside it, quietly waiting for the moment when he would step in … The coffin parade at Santa Marta de Ribarteme was, I had been assured, one of the supreme examples of those twin Galician characteristics of religiosity and superstition … Inside the tiny, stone church, a queue of men and women was barging its way noisily forward towards a polychrome statue of Santa Marta – Lazarus's sister, who once served Jesus his supper. A man with a microphone and a weary expression was berating them. 'If you could hear yourselves,' he said, 'you would realise that this sounds like anything other than the house of God.' But still they pushed anxiously forward. They were sweating in the summer heat – a hot crush of frail bodies, frayed nerves and raised voices … The sickly and the well reached out to wipe the statue, or its pedestal, with their handkerchiefs. Once the saint had been touched, the handkerchiefs were immediately passed over the owners' brow, neck or face … A uniformed wind band struck up some doleful marching music as two statues, a smaller San Antonio leading out Santa Marta herself, lurched out of the church door balanced on the villagers' shoulders. Manuel and the others stepped into their coffins and were raised aloft by their pall-bearers … Less

> than an hour later, after wandering through some woods, the procession arrived back at the church. Manuel entered in his coffin. He said his prayers, stepped out of his box, and having paid the priest 180 euros to borrow the coffin, handed it back. It was carried over to a stone shed where it joined a dozen others. Manuel, and his exhausted friends, headed back to Tuy … Miracles are part of Roman Catholic belief. Hiring a coffin may be an extreme way of giving thanks, but then there are no more traditional Roman Catholics in Spain than the Galicians.

If writing up fieldwork is to enable the reader to 'see' what you saw then it is worth considering how best to do that. "Vision is a complex assemblage of seeing what is there, seeing by virtue of habit what one expects to see there, seeing what one desires to be there and seeing what one is told to see there" (Morgan, 2005, 74). Reflecting on our expectations and desires helps us to be aware of their influence on what we see and when we write we need to make this as clear as possible. We have used the idea of 'represented religion' to refer to what participants tell us we should be seeing and this is an important part of what is going on. It is useful to include the words that an informant actually uses when you write up fieldwork. In a way, by doing this, you are getting between represented religion and living religion. The connections between language and perception are complex and not only will your seeing in the field be enhanced by more sophisticated knowledge and understanding, but the language you use in the writing process will affect the reader's ability to see what you mean. Good writing will include rich description, reflection on experience, including how you know what you claim you know, and connections with wider reading. All of these contribute to the analysis and interpretation.

It is worth stressing here that, if you read other people's accounts of their fieldwork in religion, that will help you to develop your own writing skills. At the end of this chapter there are suggestions for further reading, and the article by Mary Jo Neitz would be a good place to start. Especially as neophyte researchers, it is important to remember that we can always learn from those who have gone into the field before us, and especially those who have perhaps spent time with communities you are unlikely to visit as a part of your studies. As Evans-Pritchard noted, when quoting Malinowski:

> Everybody goes to [their host community] with preconceived ideas but, as Malinowski used to point out, whereas the layman's are uninformed, usually prejudiced, the anthropologist's are scientific, at any rate in the sense that they are based on a very considerable body of accumulated and sifted knowledge.
>
> (1973, 2)

Pilgrim/tourist/student – distinctiveness and crossover

On the door of St Catherine's church in Bethlehem there is this sign: "We are hoping that: if you enter here as a tourist, you would exit as a pilgrim. If you enter here as a pilgrim you would leave a holier one." This sign assumes that there is a clear distinction between pilgrims and tourists. The idea would be that pilgrims travel as part of their religious or spiritual practice. They go to a place which has religious significance and their journey accumulates some kind of religious merit. On the other hand, tourists have mundane, secular motives and their journeys do not involve significant personal meaning. Our experience as both travellers and tutors leading fieldwork visits in the study of religion is that this binary opposition between pilgrims and tourists is false. One of our students wrote in an assignment, "I can't help but wonder what really is holy. Am I a tourist or a pilgrim? Every pilgrim is just a tourist in disguise."

This section explores some ideas about pilgrims, tourists and the study of living religion, and some of the crossovers between them. For example, Terry Slater, a geographer, describes how his visit to Bologna, mainly for an academic conference, was both historical, spatial and personal. He visited the site of the bombing at Bologna station where two of his ex-students had died and had an experience of what he names as 'the motherhood of God'. He calls this experience a pilgrimage although it was not to a recognised pilgrimage site, but became a pilgrimage with "the complex layering of time and space in the lived world of the individual" (Slater, 2004, 251).

There is a long history of religious tourism and many earlier pilgrimages had elements that can easily be compared to modern journeys to a particular place. We will be analysing some of the similarities and differences in these roles, but there is no way of knowing in advance of a visit what its impact will be. That is part of the excitement of fieldwork in the study of religion. It is also the case that the impact of a place differs between students and also from visit to visit. This is why it is important to keep in mind YOUR responses to a place, and the ways in which your own previous life, worldviews and values impact on your experience of this place and this time. Finally, it is important to note that you will be mainly studying religion in the field along with a group of other students and staff. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes the pilgrims as a 'company'. That word literally means 'with bread' and eating with people on a visit may be significant for your experience of the visit.

Traditional religious pilgrims are often also travellers exploring the world beyond their own villages, cities and regions, and they bring home souvenirs and reminders of what they have learned. In medieval European Christian pilgrimage, for example, there was definitely an element of what is called in Latin, *curiositas*, a desire to see and understand the world, which was sometimes criticised as detracting from more spiritual motivations. In their introduction to *Reframing Pilgrimage*, Coleman and Eade, the editors, note how Muslim travel can be constructed not only as *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) but also as *hijra* (migration), *rihla* (travel for learning and other purposes), and

ziyara (visits to shrines); motives can be mixed (2004, 8). In the nineteenth century, Thomas Cook, well known for his promotion of modern tourism, began by taking people to Palestine to explore the historical and devotional aspects of Christianity.

Many today who take part in traditional pilgrimage journeys do not do so out of explicitly religious motives. For example, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela is growing in popularity each year, with thousands of people walking or cycling part or all of the traditional routes. Some are observant Christians but for many others the motivations are less clear. This is a good example of 'religious tourism', where the lines between secular and sacred are very blurred.

The Way

There is a very good film about the Camino de Santiago de Compostela written and directed by Emilio Estevez called *The Way*. The blurb advertising the film has these words:

> *The Way* is a powerful and inspirational story about family, friends and the challenges we face whilst navigating this ever-changing and complicated world. Martin Sheen plays Tom, an irascible American doctor who comes to France to deal with the tragic loss of his son (played by Emilio Estevez). Rather than return home, Tom decides to embark on the historical pilgrimage 'The Way of St. James' to honour his son's desire to finish the journey. What Tom doesn't plan on is the profound impact this trip will have on him. Through unexpected and oftentimes amusing experiences along 'The Way', Tom discovers the difference between 'the life we live and the life we choose'.

It is interesting to view the film and look at the website – see the end of the chapter for details – to explore the different motivations of those on the journey.

Alex Norman has studied the Camino as a case study for what he calls 'spiritual tourism'. He writes:

> The way the Camino is portrayed as a pilgrimage activity contributes significantly to the way it is performed. In the accounts of pilgrims' journeys we find that not only has the Camino been depicted as a means to absolve one's sins, but it is also understood to comprise a somatic process whereby one 'works through' the problems of life, before returning home. … The themes of discovery are also multifaceted and also means the journey becomes one of learning; whether about the self, about others, about 'life' in general. Generally it is the self that is the focus.
>
> (2011, 171)

The phrase 'somatic process' is interesting. It refers to the fact that the Camino is something that cannot just be seen on film or even visited. One must *do* the pilgrimage; it is a bodily engagement, a practice that one can only do for oneself, even if in the company of others.

This embodiment is also a characteristic, to some degree, of fieldwork in the study of religion. Studying religion in the field also involves travelling; it is an external journey but, as the pilgrims who spoke to Alex Norman often said, it could also be understood as part of a life journey. They hoped that the Camino would affect their lives positively in ways they could not necessarily anticipate. Engaging with living religion in the field may also do that.

Pilgrim or student of religion?

The following are two reflections from students about an extended study visit undertaken as a part of their studies – they highlight the radically different ways that students in the same group can approach engagement with religion in the field:

> 'I had my "theology student" cap on for most of the journey; however, when I walked into the garden I took that cap off. My first impressions were that it looked very small in comparison to my childhood imagery of it. Once I was in, I wanted to go off by myself for the first time on the trip and I sat quietly at a resting point by the side of the garden. Without any thought I began to cry … I managed to enter into the world that I had read about since I was a child. It was surreal … it gave me the confidence to find God "my way" again simply by giving myself the space I needed to do that.'
>
> 'As well as providing "vertical learning" – a direct transference of information, it also conveyed "horizontal learning" – giving breadth, diversity, nuances. It made me very aware that there was always another side/aspect to the information – consequences, details, etc. I learned not to take information at face value.'

Not only do religious tourists and students studying religion in the field potentially change as a result of their experiences, but, according to Stausberg, the tourism itself makes religions more mobile. He wrote:

> Tourism puts religious people, objects and ideas on the move; it contributes to the cultural and religious traffic, provides points of entry into other rounds of meaning, uproots elements of religion, and immerses them in a horizontal flow that in turn takes them beyond the organizational control of religious groups.
>
> (2011, 223)

Travel has probably always done this and continues to do so. For example, during a holiday to the Caucasus there were lots of visits to churches and monasteries at the top of fairly steep hills. As we will see in the next chapter, mountains often have religious significance. For example, Psalm 24: 3 says, "Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" It was very interesting to notice that, in Georgia, several of the tourists who could not walk up a particularly steep climb to the church at the top, refused to take a taxi. It was as if, by not walking, they were not worthy to visit the church. They weren't on a pilgrimage, but they felt they couldn't make it easy.

Engaging with living religion, even on our doorstep, may make us pilgrim, student, tourist or all three at once.

Travel and religion

Studying religion in the field involves a journey, however short. Studying religion abroad requires a much longer journey. There are some very interesting examples of accounts of journeys related to religion, not all of them pilgrimages, made by people in the past. Reading about any of these would develop your understanding of aspects of the study of religion, as well as, hopefully, encouraging you to follow in their footsteps.

- Egeria, a late fourth-century woman who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She wrote an account of her journey to women at home which was copied and some fragments remain (for a translation of the text, see www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm).
- Ibn Battutah, a fourteenth-century North African Muslim who travelled widely for thirty years in Africa, the Middle East and Asia (Mackintosh-Smith, 2002).
- Two nineteenth-century Scottish women who found and studied texts at St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert (Martin Soskice, 2010).
- Marco Polo who travelled from Venice to China in the thirteenth century (Bergreen, 2007).
- Judah Halevi was a Jewish traveller from Spain to Palestine via Egypt. There are references to him, as well as a lot of other evidence of living religion, in the Cairo Geniza (Hoffman and Cole, 2012).
- Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, although a work of fiction, gives a very vivid picture of medieval Christian pilgrimage (see Ackroyd, 2010, for a very good translation).
- John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written in England in 1678 whilst Bunyan was in prison for preaching what were forbidden religious ideas, is not about an external, physical journey, but imagines living a devout Christian life as a journey (see Bunyan, 2008).

Chapter summary

This chapter has included a lot of examples of living religion and ways of thinking about what it means to study them in the field. We want to encourage you to engage with scholarship so that your understanding and interpretation of what you experience during fieldwork is as deep and rich as possible. What you have read here will provide a framework for this. In the next chapter we focus on the places where you will be studying living religion in the field.

Further reading

Mary Jo Neitz (2000) 'Queering the Dragonfest: Changing Sexualities in a Post-Patriarchal Religion'. This is a very interesting, mainly theoretical article that draws significantly on two case studies of Wiccan practice in America.

Fiona Bowie's (2006) introductory text *The Anthropology of Religion* will make you aware of much of the relevant story of the study of religion in the field and the kinds of issues that scholars of religion have debated. However, much of the material relates to societies that very few students are likely to visit.

Questions for consideration

1 How has recent scholarship critiqued the 'World Religions' approach to the study of religion?
2 Reflect on how you think fieldwork study can contribute to a better understanding of religion. If you have already done some fieldwork, make sure you use your experiences in the field to help form your ideas.
3 How might ethnographic methods contribute to the study of religion locally?
4 Draw a scattergraph of your relation to different religious traditions and worldviews. Reflect on how this might affect your study in the field.
5 Write a vivid paragraph of 'thick description' of a religious place you have visited.

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Websites

This annotated list includes all the online sources we have referred to in the chapter as well as some recommended sites. We have given the URLs (web addresses) accessed on 31.10.14, but these do change so for ease of use we have listed them by the name of the organisation in alphabetical order.

British Religion in Numbers. This major British resource has both data and written guides to understanding religious data. www.brin.ac.uk/

Feminism and Religion is a site which publishes serious articles on feminism and religion; there is a new one every day. There is a good search facility. http://feminismand-religion.com/

Institute for Jewish Policy Research. This organisation publishes the results of major quantitative research into British Jewry. www.jpr.org.uk/

PewResearch – Religion and Public Life Project has extensive data and analysis about many topics related to religion and society, including religious affiliation, and religious belief and practice in America. http://religions.pewforum.org/

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University has been running since 1991, charting the changing religious landscape of the United States within a global context. There are a number of case studies included as a means of teaching theology and religious studies. www.pluralism.org/

Religion and Society Project. The major UK-based project led by Prof. Linda Woodhead. www.religionandsociety.org.uk/

The Religious Studies Project (discussed in an earlier textbox) is a major resource from the British Association for the Study of Religions with a large podcast archive aimed at students. www.religiousstudiesproject.com/

Research Methods for the Study of Religion: University of Kent. This is probably the best website for excellent articles and select bibliographies about a whole range of different ways of studying living religion. www.kent.ac.uk/religionmethods/index.html

Teaching Across Religions of South Asia is a website aimed at staff, not students, but it is very accessible and will help you to explore the ways in which people practice, think about and identify with religious traditions in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora which frequently cut across established boundaries of what constitutes 'religion'. http://tarosaproject.wordpress.com/

The Way is a film about the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. This site has interesting reflections on the meanings of the pilgrimage and the ideas in the film. www.theway-themovie.com/index.php

Westminster Faith Debates. An offshoot of the Religion and Society Project, which brings together politicians, religious leaders, academics and public intellectuals to speak on religion. http://faithdebates.org.uk/