Chapter 15

Insider/outsider perspectives

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Some years ago students who came to study religions at my university were introduced to the subject through a course called 'Religious Lives'. The purpose of the course was to develop an understanding of religions and their study by means of an examination of the autobiographies and biographies of a variety of religious people – what we might here call 'religious insiders'. The students came as 'outsiders' to these stories; but they also had their own stories, their own subjective experiences which they were asked to reflect on and write about. They were the 'insiders' in these accounts. The process of thinking about other people's religious lives as well as their own raised many critical questions and issues for discussion (Comstock 1995). Can we ever fully understand someone else's experience? What is the difference between an account of a religion by an insider and one by an outsider? Does translation from one language to another bridge a gap or create a barrier between the person telling the story and the one reading it? Additionally, we find ourselves considering the nature and limits of objectivity and subjectivity, 'emic' and 'etic' positions, 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts, empathy and critical analysis, the effect of personal standpoint, and the process of reflexivity. We even find that some of the lives we read about make us ask whether it is actually helpful to distinguish between insider and outsider perspectives. We will come to these matters in more detail shortly, but my purpose in listing them here is to show the range of concerns that are related to the insider/outsider debate, many of which have been at the heart of the study of religions since its inception as a discipline distinct from theology (Knott 2008). The debate challenges us by raising questions about the extent and limits of our knowledge and understanding. It invites us to consider whether or not our field of study is scientific. It is central to our methodology. It has an ethical dimension, and a political one.

Insider/outsider perspectives in the history of the study of religions

These questions came to the fore from the mid-1980s in a highly charged debate about the nature of Sikh studies and the contribution and motivation of particular scholars writing on Sikh religion (Grewal 1998; McLeod 2000; Shackle et al 2001). Who could understand and represent Sikh traditions? What were the personal motivations, epistemological standpoints and ideological interests of those who studied Sikh history and theology (King 1999)? As we shall see towards the end of this chapter, the issues in this debate eventually extended beyond the problem of the insider/outsider, but the problem was certainly of central importance early on. For example, in 1986, a collection of papers entitled *Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition* was

published. Several of its authors strongly criticised Western scholarship on Sikhism, focusing particularly on the work of W. H. McLeod, who was held to have undermined the Sikh faith as a result of his historical and critical-textual approach to Sikh traditions (Singh 1986: 10; Grewal 1998: 126–31). Then, in 1991, in a review of the work of several Western scholars, including McLeod, Darshan Singh raised a key issue:

> The Western writers' attempt to interpret and understand Sikhism is an outsider's or non-participant's endeavour ... Primarily, religion is an area which is not easily accessible to the outsider, foreigner or non-participant. The inner meaning of a religion unfolds only through participation; by following the prescribed path and discipline.
>
> (1991: 3)

As we see from this case, the question of who can reliably understand and present a religion is contested. Darshan Singh and the authors of *Perspectives*, while accepting that Western outsiders have played a significant role in the development of Sikh studies, are suspicious of their motives (whether Christian or secular in origin), critical of their academic methods, and favour – by extension – the contribution of insiders to such studies. The strengths and weaknesses of participation and non-participation by scholars in the religions they study is a subject I shall return to shortly, but first I shall consider how, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Western scholars of the kind criticised above tackled the question of studying religions – both their own and those of others.

Emerging in the West as a field of enquiry with different objectives and methods to theology, the proponents of the early study of religions (also known as Religionswissenschaft and the history of religions) drew attention to its scientific, objective and comparative character (Waardenburg 1973; Sharpe 1975; Whaling 1995). They stressed the value of impartial scholarly accounts, and the development of appropriate conceptual tools, theories and methods. Writing in 1873, Max Müller stated that, as the object of study, religion should be shown reverence, but that it should also be subjected to critical scholarship. Twenty years later Cornelius Tiele, stressing the need among scientists of religion for objectivity but not judgement about the forms of religion, considered whether such scholarship was best done by believers or non-believers, concluding that, 'It is an error to suppose that one cannot take up such an impartial scientific position without being a sceptic; that one is disqualified for an impartial investigation if one possesses fixed and earnest religious convictions of one's own' (Tiele from *Elements of the Science of Religion* (1897–9), in Waardenburg 1973: 99). He distinguished between the private religious subjectivity of the individual and his or her outward impartiality as a scholar of religion. Tiele was not asserting that only sceptical non-believers or outsiders could study religions; rather, he was suggesting that those who were themselves religious were fully able to be impartial in their studies. This view, that those studying religion should set to one side their subjective experience and cultural baggage, and take an objective position with regard to the other, prevailed for nearly a century.

These issues were given consideration by other scholars, especially those associated with the phenomenology of religion, particularly Kristensen, van der Leeuw and Otto in Northern Europe, and later Eliade and Cantwell Smith in North America and Ninian Smart in Britain. They held the view, to quote Kristensen, that all religious phenomena were 'unique, autonomous and incomparable', yet capable of understanding by means of empathy, that is, by reliving in one's own experience that which appears to be alien (Kristensen from *The Meaning of Religion* in Waardenburg 1973: 391). While it was impossible to apprehend

religion or the sacred in and of itself, it was possible to understand its manifestations or appearances (van der Leeuw 1963). The underlying aim of the phenomenological approach was to understand – by empathetic and imaginative re-experience – the insider position while refraining from forming a judgement about its truth or falsity (that being the domain of the theologian or philosopher).

The contemporary form of the insider/outsider debate, which has focused on the limits and desirability of such an approach, has raised different issues. A number of critics have argued that the phenomenology of religion has been implicitly theological (Segal 1983; Wiebe 1985), even a spiritual technique in its own right (McCutcheon 1997). Its assumptions about the essential, fundamental and totalising nature of the sacred, and its frequent adoption of Christian categories and types for the theorisation of religion have been deemed to be problematic (Fitzgerald 2000). Critics have questioned the rhetoric of impartiality and critical distance associated with phenomenology (Flood 1999).

Two rather different approaches to the study of religions have emerged in the West in recent decades. One is avowedly secular and scientific (Segal 1983; Wiebe 1985; McCutcheon 1997). It values an objective, outsider stance. It starts from the view that we cannot assume a common human nature across which categories such as religion and experiences of the sacred are shared. Instead, the social nature of religion and its capacity to be studied like other ideologies and institutions must be acknowledged. The aim of the scholar of religion should not be to get inside the experience and meaning of religious phenomena, but to build upon the benefits of critical distance to explain religion from the outside. The second approach focuses upon reflexivity (Brown 1991; Hufford 1995; King 1995; Flood 1999). Rather than requiring greater objectivity, as the previous approach does, it requires greater awareness on the part of the scholar about the dialogical nature of scholarship. While not being necessarily opposed to phenomenology, its criticism of that approach has been that the exponents of the latter were insufficiently aware of their intellectual and personal standpoint vis-à-vis others. They failed to take sufficient account of the effect of their position – either as individuals, often themselves religious, or as members of privileged groups of scholars, often Western and male – on their understanding of religion. Critics of this take a reflexive stance which requires that, as scholars, they research and write consciously from within their context and standpoint, whether as insiders or outsiders. Some couch this criticism in terms of post-colonialism, stressing the importance of a scholarly engagement with issues of identity, power and status (Shaw 1995; Flood 1999; King 1999; Donaldson and Pui-Lan 2002).

In his sourcebook on the insider/outsider problem – which may be consulted in association with this chapter – McCutcheon (1999) sought to categorise responses to the problem as follows: (i) the autonomy of religious experience, which he associated with the phenomenological approach; (ii) reductionism, exemplified by those taking a scientific, objective outsider stance; (iii) neutrality and methodological agnosticism, as adopted by those such as Ninian Smart who relied on insider accounts without evaluating their truth or falsity; and (iv) reflexivity. McCutcheon's presentation and discussion of these responses was introduced with reference to two terms which derive from the work of the linguist, Kenneth Pike. The *emic* perspective arises 'from studying behaviour as from inside the system' (Pike 1967: 37); the *etic* perspective, as from the outside. The former, then, is an attempt,

> to produce as faithfully as possible – in a word, to describe – the informant's own descriptions ... The etic perspective is the observer's subsequent attempt to take the

> descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare – in a word redescribe – that information in terms of a system of their own making ...
> (McCutcheon 1999: 17)

These terms are of central importance for understanding the perspectives of insider and outsider scholars.

Researching religious groups: insider/outsider perspectives and participant observation

Having dealt briefly with how some of the issues relating to the insider/outsider debate have been theorised, I shall turn now to a range of examples in order to investigate how these issues have been dealt with in practice. Our focus moves, then, from the theoretical to the methodological. For this purpose, I have developed a diagram to portray insider and outsider positions based on a model of participant/observer roles from the social sciences. The term 'participant observation' has commonly been used in anthropology to refer to the process of conducting research by living within a community over a period of time, participating in its life and observing its activities and use of symbols in order to develop an understanding of its meaning and structures (Davies 1999). This anthropological strategy need not detain us here. Rather, it is the four role conceptions of complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer – first identified by two sociologists called Junker and Gold in the 1950s – that we shall consider here with reference to insider and outsider perspectives (Gold 1958: 217). They may be plotted on a continuum as follows:

OUTSIDER			INSIDER
Complete observer	Observer as participant	Participant as observer	Complete participant

If we take this diagram as illustrating the roles of those involved in researching religious groups, we can see that a number of positions are possible (though Gold's view was somewhat different as he took all researchers to be outsiders by default). I shall take the polar opposites first, followed by the two mid-way positions. At one end are those who are fully involved in religious activity as participants. They write about religion as insiders. Objectivity is not their purpose; critical distance is not their aim. They are scholars who write about their religion, with the benefit of an insider's faith and knowledge, as engaged participants (see Stringer 2002). They are unapologetic about this position, often believing that insiders like themselves provide the most informed and reliable accounts of their religion. I will look to the work of Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim scholar, for an example of this. Mernissi (1991) does not make a general case for the value of participant insider accounts, but rather shows how such accounts arise from particular standpoints and motivations. There is no single, uncontested view of what constitutes a religion like Islam; there are many differing participant accounts.

Moving to the far left of the diagram, we will turn to the role of the complete observer. Here we might expect to find a scholar who researches and writes about religion from the outside, eschewing any kind of participation. This is a position often associated with the psychology and sociology of religion, particularly with studies in which the researcher observes by means of the scientific use and analysis of questionnaires or structured interviews. My example is the fascinating study by Festinger, Riecken and Schachter carried out in the mid-1950s that

revealed what happened to a religious group when its prophecy failed. We shall see how the researchers attempted to reproduce the complete observer stance in a situation where participation turned out to be unavoidable.

The role of the observer-as-participant will be examined in relation to Eileen Barker's stance in *The Making of a Moonie* (1984). From this we will discern a line of continuity with the phenomenological approach outlined earlier, particularly with the strategy of 'methodological agnosticism' commonly associated with the work of Ninian Smart (1973).

We will turn finally to those scholarly participants who adopt the role of observer in the midst of their own religious communities. They generally adopt a more critical stance than those who are complete participants, while remaining of the faith and sharing in the benefits of an insider's knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the community. For an understanding of this role we will examine the reflections of Samuel Heilman, a modernist Jew and sociologist writing in the 1980s before turning to those scholarly participants who have developed a reflexive and postmodernist critique of the insider/outsider problem (Pearson 2002; Collins 2002; Mandair 2001).

Fatima Mernissi: a complete but contentious participant?

OUTSIDER — INSIDER
Complete participant

The majority of books written about religions are written by those who participate in them. There are numerous publishing houses associated with religious institutions; many groups have in-house newsletters and journals. In all of these, people of faith share with their co-religionists accounts of religious experience, religious ideas, responses to scripture, and thoughts about religious behaviour, ethics and the public demonstration of their faith. In addition, most religions have a class of scholars who reflect on, speak and write about their doctrinal, philosophical, legal or textual traditions, and may interpret them according to the needs of the time, or codify them so that they may be remembered and used in the future. Those who comprise such classes of scholars (theologians, rabbis, muftis, pandits and so on), often men, are by definition participants and insiders.

I have chosen Fatima Mernissi to illustrate the complete participant role, notably the stance she takes in *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991). As a Muslim feminist sociologist, she is hardly the obvious choice. Mernissi herself cites a case where she was denounced, by the editor of an Islamic journal, as a liar and misrepresentative of Islamic tradition. She is certainly not an authorised Islamic leader nor a trained theologian, but, as one who writes as a Muslim with the deliberate intention of recovering the Islamic past in order to understand women's rights, she evidently counts herself as an insider. What is more, she has a clear sense that this is not just a matter of private belief, but of legal requirement and communal identity:

> It is time to define what I mean when I say 'we Muslims'. The expression does not refer to Islam in terms of an individual choice, a personal option. I define being Muslim as belonging to a theocratic state ... Being Muslim is a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights.
>
> (20–1)

It is the denial of such rights to women in Muslim states that is of concern to Mernissi and that passionately engages her as a Muslim, a feminist and a scholar, as a result of which she turns her intellectual powers and scholarly training to the Hadith, the collections by later scholars of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. She is a critical religious insider tackling an issue of significance to contemporary Muslim women by recovering the foundational stories of the women around Muhammad and interrogating the misogynism of later interpretative accounts. In the preface to the English edition to her book, she writes:

> We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition.
>
> (viii)

Mernissi's is an emic, but not uncritical perspective. Rather than using the 'experience-distant' language of either comparative religion or sociology, she uses the 'experience-near' language of Islam (Geertz 1974), stressing, in particular, the centrality of the concept of *hijab* for an understanding of Muslim civilisation. Although she has not received the training associated with the *ulama*, she draws on the same sources of authority, though emphasising different stories and offering variant readings.

Although her book is not directed explicitly at a non-Muslim audience, Mernissi is clearly aware of the dominant Western critique, which has tended to see Islam as undemocratic and oppressive of women, and is keen to show that, in its foundational stories, there are 'matters dangerous to the establishment, of human dignity and equal rights' (Mernissi 1991: ix). She wishes to make clear to other Muslims that taking up the cause of women's rights does not place her outside Islamic tradition or Muslim society. She eschews the role of the secular feminist outsider and embraces that of participant in the narration of Islamic memory (10).

Can a single example, like that of Mernissi, point to a plurality of cases? I believe so. In choosing Mernissi – an insider who cites and disputes the views of many other Muslim insiders – I have indicated the complexity of insider perspectives. Choosing a feminist insider as an example has raised the issue of contestation between different insider-scholars within a single religion.

The struggle to be the complete observer

OUTSIDER — INSIDER

Complete observer

From an emic account in which experience-near concepts are to the fore, we now move to an etic one in which the language of social science is used to explain psychological behaviour resulting from religious belief. In the final part of their study of what happens to a messianic group when prophecy fails, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956) examined the methodological difficulties that arose when trying to sustain the stance of the complete observer in a qualitative study of a dynamic religious community. At the time when they conducted their study, the key principles of social scientific research were objectivity,

neutrality, the ability to repeat experiments, to demonstrate the validity of their results and to generalise from them. Many sociologists and psychologists used a quantitative approach, for example, by developing and administering a questionnaire (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1996). Festinger and his co-researchers decided that such an approach was inappropriate for examining the cognitive and behavioural responses of a group of believers to 'undeniable disconfirmatory evidence' (1956: 4). Rather, it was essential to observe a group closely during such a process. Had it been possible to set up an experiment of this kind in a laboratory, behind glass, the researchers would no doubt have done so.

In fact, what they did was to await signs (in the media) of prophetic group activity, gain covert admittance to a group, and then observe the behaviour of its members from the inside. They adopted insider roles, as seekers who were 'non-directive, sympathetic listeners, passive participants who were inquisitive and eager to learn whatever others might want to tell us' (234). Such undercover work was deemed necessary to avoid alerting the group to the fact that it was being researched, and thus to avoid influencing the very beliefs, attitudes and responses they wished to observe.

Although the researchers were scientific outsiders, to the prophet, Mrs Keech, and her followers, they appeared to be complete participants. They were, however, students and staff from a variety of university psychology and sociology departments trained in observational methods. As such, they were conscious of the need to satisfy social scientific conditions, though they found themselves departing from 'the orthodoxy of social science in a number of respects', notably, in being unable 'to subject the members of the group to any standardised measuring instrument, such as a questionnaire or structured interview' (249). Further, they unintentionally reinforced members' beliefs, e.g. by seeming to confirm the view that they had been sent to join the group for a special purpose. They found it impossible to avoid discussing the belief system with members, answering calls from enquirers, and being seen by the movement's leaders as messengers from the Guardians (supernatural beings thought by members to be guiding the movement). All of these put them in a position of influencing those people they were supposed to be observing.

Despite these difficulties, *When Prophecy Fails* is an etic account as its purpose, hypothesis, methods, analysis, reporting and audience are evidently social scientific and not religious. While the researchers took seriously members' beliefs and responses, they did so only in so far as these were data to be collected and evaluated. The issue of their truth or falsity was not mentioned. Neither did the authors formally reflect on whether they accepted any of the beliefs of the group. Rather, they pretended 'to be merely interested individuals who had been persuaded of the correctness of the belief system' (249). Their pretence as insiders raises ethical questions about whether and in what ways the subjects of research should be informed and involved in decisions about the research process. The use in the book of terms such as 'covert', 'detective' and 'surveillance' heightens the distinction between the outsider-observer on the one side (in control, invisible, investigating), and the insider-observed on the other (passive, highly visible, exposed to detailed investigation), thereby raising the issue of power in the scholarly study and presentation of religious groups.

Arguably, this case fails to do full justice to the observer role because the demands of the research required the scholars involved to compromise their position as outsiders (by necessitating that they pretend to be participants). Nevertheless, we have been able to see how difficult it is for even the most determined observers to remain uninvolved, impartial and scientific when examining the subject of religious belief at close quarters. In the next section, we will consider whether an observer-as-participant who is known to and accepted

by insiders encounters fewer problems. What are the characteristics of this stance? What difference does it make to the research if the participating observer owns up to being an outsider?

In neutral: the observer-as-participant

OUTSIDER — Observer as participant — INSIDER

From the start of her investigation, Eileen Barker rejected the possibility of undertaking covert research on the Unification Church on both practical and ethical grounds: 'It was known that I was not a Moonie. I never pretended that I was, or that I was likely to become one' (1984: 20; see Lauder (2003) for a defence of covert research).

> I usually found my time with the movement interesting, and I grew genuinely fond of several individual Moonies, but at no time could I believe in the Unification version of reality. On the other hand, I could not accept the picture of the movement that outsiders kept telling me I ought to be finding.
>
> (1984: 21)

Barker's purpose in investigating the Unification Church, or 'Moonies' as they were frequently called, was to answer the question, 'Why should – how could – anyone become a Moonie?' (1). Little was known about them in the mid-1970s (despite the fact that the movement had been founded in 1954, in Korea), except for what was gleaned from negative media coverage about the leader and the conversion strategies of the movement which tended to stimulate fear and fascination rather than a desire to learn or to be informed. Sceptical of both the movement's self-image and the media account, Barker became an authorised observer whose research method was one of engaged participation. She lived in Unification centres, attended workshops, listened to members, engaged in conversations, asked questions and interviewed ex-members. Her stance, by her own admittance, had its strengths and weaknesses.

> Being known to be a non-member had its disadvantages, but by talking to people who had left the movement I was able to check that I was not missing any of the internal information which was available to rank-and-file members. At the same time, being an outsider who was 'inside' had enormous advantages. I was allowed (even, on certain occasions, expected) to ask questions that no member would have presumed to ask either his leaders or his peers.
>
> (21)

Barker borrowed a term from the work of Max Weber to identify her approach to understanding why people became Moonies: '*Verstehen* is a process of inquiry during which the researcher tries to put himself in other people's shoes or ... to see the world through their glasses' (20). Although she contextualised this with reference to the social sciences, it had much in common with the empathetic approach favoured by the phenomenologists of religion reviewed earlier in this account: Kristensen, van der Leeuw and, latterly, Ninian

Smart. It was Smart who first used the term 'methodological agnosticism' to signal the need for neutrality and the bracketing-out of truth claims and judgements in research on religion. Barker shared this view, believing that 'passing value judgements should be an enterprise that is separate from social science' (36). Rather, she hoped to bring together what she saw as 'an objective factual account of the history and beliefs of the movement' (10) with diverse voices from within and outside it.

Barker's etic account, interspersed with the experiences of Moonies, ex-Moonies, non-Moonies and anti-Moonies, represented a conscious attempt to *translate* Moonie reality and values for those unfamiliar with them. She found that she was able to stay in touch with outsiders' often unsympathetic and quizzical attitudes while becoming engrossed in Moonie reality by regularly re-reading her research diary. She was reminded of her own journey from ignorance to knowledge about the movement. She believed in the attempt to bridge the divergent perpectives of insiders and outsiders, and saw this as an appropriate scholarly task. Furthermore, she held that it was 'perfectly possible to see things from other people's points of view without necessarily agreeing that they are right' (35). At the same time, she recognised that there were those on both sides who believed that neutrality was impossible, even immoral.

The methodological agnosticism identified by Smart – and pursued by Barker – dominated the study of religion in the 1970s and 1980s. It upheld the dichotomy between inside and outside, positing the need for a value-free translator who would bridge the two perspectives. Barker exemplified the role of observer-as-participating translator. But could an outsider ever fulfil this role? Could such a scholar really be agnostic, or would his or her act of observation necessarily call such a stance into question?

The participant-as-observer comes of age

OUTSIDER — Participant as observer — INSIDER

As we saw in the 1890s with Tiele and in the 1980s with Barker, many scholars of religion – with personal religious convictions or with none – have held that an impartial stance is possible. Indeed, many religious people have sought to research and write about their own religion *as if* they were observers, with objectivity and critical distance. It has often been the aim of such participants-as-observers to provide an entrée into their religion, its beliefs and practices, for outsiders; to make comprehensible, often through the use of 'experience-distant' concepts and commonly accepted scientific methods, the esoteric world from which they come. They have often shared this aim with observers-as-participants (like Barker), and have sought to exercise a bridge-building role with the purpose of communicating what is thought or practised within the religion to those outside it.

Many participants-as-observers have commented sensitively on their own position and purpose in writing as believers and practitioners. This has been especially true since the 1990s, with the impact of a critical postmodernist and reflexive stance. Several examples which exemplify this will be considered later in the section. First, we will look at an example from the 1980s in which orthodox religiosity and modernist sociology met in an autobiographical account by Samuel Heilman, *The Gate Behind the Wall* (1984, partially reproduced in Comstock 1995).

> I live in two worlds ... In one, I am attached to an eternal yesterday – a timeless faith and ritual, an ancient system of behavior. In that world, I am an Orthodox Jew. In my other world, there is little if any attachment to the enchantment of religion or sacred practice, and what is happening today or tomorrow matters far more than the verities embedded in the past. In that domain, I am a university professor of sociology.
>
> (Comstock 1995: 214)

Heilman describes this as 'a double life' in which the two aspects are compartmentalised, and which is generally maintained by forgetting one aspect while living out the other. He proceeds, though, to describe the attempt he made 'to collapse the boundaries between these two worlds and find a way to make myself whole' (214).

Starting out as a modern Orthodox Jewish sociologist, Heilman undertook a sociological study of his own synagogue community,

> believing that as an insider I could supply, through both introspection and a sense of the relevant questions to ask, information about dimensions of inner life not readily available to other researchers ... I would be able to give a fuller picture of the synagogue than could any outsider, however well prepared and trained he might be.
>
> (218)

Reflecting back on this exercise, he discovered that he had 'found my way back into the traditional synagogue from my new home in the University via the tools of my social science' (218). However, he harboured a further ambition, to fulfil his sacred duty to engage in *lernen*, the Yiddish term for the Orthodox Jewish practice of reviewing the sacred texts with devotion and awe (216). On the advice of his rabbi, he further utilised his professional skills as a participant observer in seeking out and participating in a traditional study circle or *chavruse* in Jerusalem. We see in this a desire both to fulfil personal religious commitments and to describe and explain the world of the *chavruse* to outsiders. What is of interest in Heilman's powerful account is, first, the way in which his position as participant-as-observer is demonstrated through the use of spatial imagery and specialist concepts, and, second, the way in which he reflects upon that position.

Heilman's title, *The Gate Behind the Wall*, in addition to situating us in Jewish Jerusalem at or near the Wailing Wall, promises us entry into a traditional and esoteric world from which, as outsiders, we are normally excluded, but to which, as an insider/outsider Jew, he was powerfully attracted. Further, he uses the imagery of walls, gates, rooms and doors to describe his modernist journey: 'Old walls made new through a process of uncovering seemed the right metaphor for my own quest' (221). In distinguishing between the compartmentalisation from which he was trying to escape and the wholeness he sought, he used the metaphor of rooms: in the former, 'one simply learns to dim the lights in one room while passing into the other'; in the *chavruse*, 'compartments collapse, and rooms open into one another' (229). Despite his most fervent efforts, though, as a modernist Jew, he felt unable to transcend his sense of distance; unable to escape 'the barriers of biography' (230).

Heilman's two purposes (and two worlds) are mirrored in his use of both 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts. He does not shy away from using Yiddish and Hebrew terms, but he also uses the language of religious studies and the social sciences in order to move his account beyond the descriptive and ethnographic to the analytical and theoretical. Repeatedly, he uses terms such as tradition, culture, liturgy and sacred text (rather than

equivalent terms from Orthodox Judaism), and also introduces social scientific concepts such as liminality (227), authenticity (225) and organising principle (228). As autobiographical scholarship, Heilman's account is subjective in character. However, it goes beyond description of the participant's experience by offering an examination of the limits of Heilman's role as a modernist Orthodox Jewish sociologist. He suggests that the process of observation – of others and the self – by one who is an insider produces a feeling of separation. His repeated references to walls, borders, gates, barriers, doors and limits demonstrate this seemingly unalterable affliction: 'As if by some sort of biological rejection process, the strangeness in me was forcing me out (of the *chavruse*)' (230).

How have participants-as-observers since Heilman found this role? Have their purposes in writing from the inside out been comparable to his? Have their experiences of observation and the practice of writing about it been similar? Two authors, writing in a recent book on the insider/outsider problem, reveal the way in which the understanding of this role is changing. Both authors are critical of the juxtaposition of insiders and outsiders, and see the value of the critical insider stance. However, the first asserts the benefits of the both/and principle; the second commends the dissolution of the distinction between the two positions.

Jo Pearson (2002), whose study of British Wicca is entitled 'Going native in reverse', notes that there are some religions, requiring initiation, which are largely inaccessible to outsiders. For an understanding of these, we are dependent upon insiders who act as a bridge between the inside and outside, and facilitate the two aspects of involvement and distance. Such an insider-researcher acts as both insider and outsider, and the movement back and forth opens him or her up to a range of types of information: that which is available to outsiders, that which is only available to those within the researched community (insiders), and that which becomes available to the researcher through his or her reflexive participation in the research process.

At the end of an ethnographic account of his own Quaker meeting, Peter Collins (2002) disputes the notions of self and society which underlie the dualism of insider and outsider. He uses imagery similar to Heilman's to invoke the modernist perspective which sees society 'as a series of buildings each with a single door which serves both as entrance and exit: either one is in or one is out, and if one is in one building then one cannot at the same time be in another' (93). Collins's view, of a more processual society and a more dynamic self, in which worlds are overlapping and interactive rather than isolated and separate, makes the distinction between insider and outsider largely redundant. All participants create social meaning through the common practice of story telling, and this, in turn, dissolves the boundaries between inside and out.

Heilman writes of the unresolved tension of being between two worlds as a Jew who is also a sociologist. Pearson suggests that, whatever its difficulties, the both/and position of the insider-scholar is productive, the reflexive nature of its stance giving it the edge over outsider scholarship. Collins concludes that the distinction between insider and outsider becomes irrelevant when we recognise that all those who participate, whether of the faith or not, contribute to the co-construction of the story. The insider/outsider dichotomy is an unhelpful consequence of a modernist view of self and society.

Where does the problem lie, and what is the way forward?

This last view is similar to one expressed by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, a participant in the Sikh studies debate with which I began. In an attempt to understand its ideological contours, Mandair (2001) locates the problem in 'the current intellectual and methodological crisis or rupture in the human and social sciences' (49) in which 'secular reason has been placed in a position of supervision in respect of any possible inquiry into religion' (50). As he sees it, the Sikh studies debate is not so much a function of the insider/outsider problem (as suggested by Darshan Singh) as of the modernist turn from religious to secular thinking. In the case of Sikh studies, this has had the effect of making insider critiques of Western scholarship look like traditionalist, even fundamentalist, attacks.

Mandair is not merely being defensive here; there is a case to answer. Most twentieth-century studies of religions – whether they be historical, in the case of Sikh studies, phenomenological or sociological, in the case of our other examples – were rooted in the discourse of secular reason and scientific enquiry. Their authors spoke the language of neutrality, impartiality, objectivity, observation, reductionism, methodological agnosticism and atheism (Hufford 1995). Both outsiders and scholarly insiders sought to articulate their positions in these terms. With the latter, as we saw with Heilman, this led to a sense of tension, the result of being an insider subjectively caught up in an experience while endeavouring to maintain the appropriate level of critical distance required by the scholarly establishment.

Both Collins and Mandair invite us to step away from the imprisonment of this modernist position, but their diagnoses are different. Collins offers a postmodern response: the abandonment of dichotomous views of insider/outsider in favour of a more dynamic view in which everyone is a co-participant in the formulation of a narrative about religion. Mandair favours the move to a study of religion (Sikhism) that 'is at once a form of self-discovery, no less spiritual than political, no less therapeutic than classificatory' (68–9), in short, an antidote to the dominant objectivist, secularist approach.

Collins and Mandair invite us in different ways to reconceptualise the terms of our discipline in such a way that we are no longer compelled to compartmentalise the world of faith and the world of scholarship. For some scholars this would be a step too far, one which undermines the distinction between those doing religion and those observing it, between theology and the study of religions, indeed the very *raison d'être* of the latter as a field of study with its own terms of reference (Flood 1999; Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 2003). In his attempt to think 'beyond phenomenology', however, Gavin Flood offers a strategy for reconfiguring critical distance, 'outsideness' and situated observation in the study of religions which depends not upon modernist notions of objectivity and the phenomenological assertion of non-confessionalism, but rather upon a dialogical and reflexive engagement between scholars and the religious people they study. My own view, formed in the context of developing a spatial methodology for the study of religion, is that *all* interlocutors – whether secular observers, religious participants, or those who strategically move between the two positions – are actors within a single knowledge-power field (Knott 2005). Despite their differing goals and interests, they have together defined, constituted and criticised 'religion' in general, particular 'religions' and their beliefs and practices, and the secular or non-religious domain beyond religion. The 'secular' (which has constituted the 'outside' in this discussion about scholarly positioning on religion) is indeed within the same field of action and discourse as the 'religious'; and, although the field contains operational boundaries, groups and factions, all those within it are in one sense 'insiders', although as they go about

their business they variously constitute themselves and others as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in accordance with their ideological and social purposes.

The scholars discussed in this chapter have not only shown us the centrality of the insider/outsider problem in the study of religions, they have also highlighted the complex issues of subjectivity and objectivity, emic and etic perspectives, the politics and ethics of researching and writing about religion (whether as an outsider or an insider), the epistemological and methodological implications of the problem, and its ideological location within Western secular modernism. These are profound matters for anyone studying religions. What more recent perspectives show is that the problem of the insider and outsider is as vital now for understanding the theory and method of religious studies as it was when the latter first emerged as a discipline separate from theology more than a century ago.

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Suggested reading

Arweck, Elisabeth and Stringer, Martin, eds, *Theorising Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, Birmingham, Birmingham University Press.
Useful introduction and collection of essays on insider/outsider issues which includes cited articles by scholarly insiders, Collins and Pearson.

Davies, Charlotte Aull, 1999, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, London, Routledge.
Major work from the methodological literature on insider/outsider issues and reflexivity.

Flood, Gavin, 1999, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*, London, Cassell.
Important study which questions the adequacy of the phenomenology of religion and suggests that insiders and outsiders are dialogical partners in the study of religion.

Hufford, David J., 1995, 'The scholarly voice and the personal voice: reflexivity in belief studies', *Western Folklore*, 54, 57–76.
Article on insider/outsider issues and reflexivity.

McCutcheon, Russell T., ed., 1999, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, London and New York, Cassell.
Key text for understanding the issues involved in the insider/outsider problem; includes readings on all aspects of the problem and an excellent introduction.