UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies

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METHOD

Insider-Outsider Debates, Phenomenology, and Reflexivity

IN WHICH WE EXPLORE:

The insider-outsider debate in the study of religion
Debates around phenomenology in the study of religion
Questions about how we know and understand
The reflexive turn
Case studies of conversion and reconversion, and multiple religious belonging

INTRODUCTION

The distinction between people who are members of religious communities (insiders) and those who are not members of those religious communities, often scholars studying them (outsiders), may seem straightforward. However, when we start to push at this concept we soon see cracks appearing. We can note four questions:

- If somebody brought up within a religion leaves her religion, can she retain an understanding of what it "feels" like to be an insider?
- If a scholar studies her own religion, can she be both an insider and an outsider?
- Are nominal believers/practitioners as much of an insider as those deeply committed?

- Are religious "professionals" (priest/nun/leader) more of an insider than an ordinary member or layperson?

These four simple questions show that imagining insider and outsider as two clear and distinct positions is mistaken. Nevertheless, these terms can help us think about how we conceive religious and non-religious boundaries and identities. We will use these questions as starting points for considering some methods in the study of religion. We begin by looking at the typical world religions paradigm (WRP, see chapter 1) and how this shapes how we think about the territory. This leads us directly to discussing the insider-outsider debate, and from there we will discuss phenomenology and what is termed the "reflexive turn." This more theoretical discussion will lead us back to looking again at the insider-outsider debate and challenging some distinctions, partly by asking questions about the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) designation as well as the possibility of having multiple religious identities (MRI). We conclude with two case studies.

THE PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT OF RELIGION

THE WORLD RELIGIONS PARADIGM, RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES, AND AUTHORITY

The world religions paradigm (WRP) shapes the way we think about religion (see box 2.1). We can certainly ask whether the way we normally think about religion affects our concepts of identity and belonging (chapter 6), or what it means to be an insider or outsider. So, what does the WRP mean for religious identity/belonging?

Arguably, scholars have inherited many aspects of a Christian, or more particularly modern Protestant, conception of religion. This manifests in the WRP. We can summarize some key assumptions of the WRP that are relevant for us here:

- Religions are bounded territories of belonging. Therefore, each religion is a distinct and discrete unit to which sole allegiance is required.
- Religion is primarily about belief in a set of principles. Therefore, you cannot adhere to more than one set of beliefs at a time.
- Every religious tradition has its own set of meanings leading to a clearly defined set of beliefs and practices. Therefore, you can only practice as an "insider" of one religion (at a time).

These features could be seen as reflecting an Abrahamic paradigm (see box 2.2). That is, on the whole, they fit the three traditions which trace their roots to Abraham (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). However, it may not be the way we see religion operating elsewhere in the world. For instance, in South Asian Hindu and Sikh traditions, people have more readily crossed boundaries, as has often also been the case with Islam in that part of the world.[1] This is also especially common in East Asia (see below and boxes 13.1 and 16.7).

BOX 2.1 **WHAT IS THE WORLD RELIGIONS PARADIGM (WRP)?**

The world religions paradigm (WRP) is the matrix of constructs that has evolved in the modern Western world through the influence of scholars and missionaries, among others, attempting to make sense of the data that came to be classified as "religions." In general, it prioritizes those things which seemed natural or important in the tradition with which those scholars and missionaries were familiar, generally Protestant Christianity. Therefore, religion came to be imagined, or created, as:

- having systems with beliefs and creedal statements;
- having foundational books which determine what they *really* teach;
- focused on an inner, private, experience, whereas rituals and externals were superstitious or not essential (see boxes 9.3 and 9.4); and
- organized in clear hierarchical ways based around a priesthood, though this group could also be treated with suspicion.

BOX 2.2 **ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS**

The term "Abrahamic religions" refers to the three traditions that trace their origins to the legendary patriarch Abraham as a foundational figure: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The term is sometimes used to suggest a deep kinship among the three. But each tradition has very different ideas about Abraham and the mythic heritage that derives from him. Its usage here denotes only the common appeal to a shared originator, and does not imply any special kinship, notwithstanding clear historical connections.[1]

1 See Aaron Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15–56; and Jon Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

The idea that we can only be an insider to one "religion" is, globally and historically, neither natural nor normative.

Another related factor is whether religion is primarily a matter of belief, practice, or something else (see chapters 3, 9, and 12). Indeed, we can pick out three areas:[2]

- Religions which emphasize orthodoxy (correct/standard doctrine/belief).
- Religions which emphasize orthopraxy (correct/standard practice/ritual).
- Religions which emphasize cultural authenticity (correct/standard forms of roles/norms).

It is sometimes suggested that certain religions emphasize one or the other:

- Christianity emphasizes orthodoxy; that is, you are an insider if you accept the correct beliefs.
- Judaism emphasizes orthopraxy; that is, differences of belief can exist. A well-known joke is that if you have three rabbis, you will find four different opinions. You are an insider as long as rituals are observed.
- Thai Buddhism stresses cultural performance or authenticity; that is, you are an insider if you fulfill roles determined by social and cultural factors which go beyond both scriptural/doctrinal injunctions (orthodoxy) and prescribed ritual actions (orthopraxy).[3]

However, all three areas exist as interacting poles that determine normative practices and assumptions.[4] Orthodoxy is not unrelated to orthopraxy and cultural authenticity. Even within one religious tradition, what is deemed "correct" belief, ritual, or behavior may differ across time and geographical locations (see chapter 4). This raises questions about what acts as markers of identity or "insiderness" in any specific context.

KEY THEORETICAL ISSUES

INSIDER-OUTSIDER AND EMIC-ETIC

Some specific terminology and theory can help us think through some of the emerging issues. Insider and outsider can be seen as giving rise to two specific ways of talking about religion:

Insider accounts: Descriptions by a member about their own tradition.

Outsider accounts: Descriptions by a nonmember about another person's tradition.

We need, when speaking of these, to take care not to always see these as distinct poles. This is highlighted by the terms "emic" and "etic," coined by Kenneth Pike (1912–2000). Both refer to outsider accounts (though many mistakenly see them as synonyms of insider and outsider) as ways that scholars may speak of religions:

Emic accounts: Descriptions given in terms meaningful to a believer, that is, using terms native to the tradition being described.

Etic accounts: Description given in external theoretical terms devised by scholars.

This brings us into a further debate of who understands a tradition "better": the insider, who knows what it "means" and "feels" like from the inside, or the outsider, who may be seen to bring objectivity? We may then ask what we mean by the term "better." Anthropologists, whether looking at religion or cultures, have often suggested that we actually need both. While an outsider can bring a sense of objectivity and classificatory tools and

BOX 2.3 **UNDERSTANDING PHENOMENOLOGY**

Phenomenology as a philosophical position goes back to Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who saw it as a way to grasp the "essence" of things. It passed into the study of religion especially in the mid to late twentieth century.[1] To give a broad brushstroke description, the method of phenomenology involves two steps:

- First, we undertake the act of *epoché,* which means a suspension of judgment. We put aside our existing understanding and preconceptions, so we can come to the thing as it is in itself (i.e., the phenomenon, hence phenomenology).
- Second, having done this, we then use *eidetic* vision, which is to say seeing things as a whole. In other words, not just to see the surface but to dig down to know something as an "essence."

This may sound vague, but Husserl gave a very straightforward example. Suppose we walk into a room and see a chair. However, as we enter, we do not see the whole chair, only the back. Husserl suggests, though, that we commonly use *eidetic* vision so that, in our mind, we see/know that it has a seat, four legs (if we only see two), and so forth. While this is a specific skill to be cultivated by the scholar, Husserl believed that we could all understand the practice.

1 See George Chryssides, "Phenomenology and its Critics," in Chryssides and Geaves, *Insider/Outsider Debate,* 157–82, James Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010); and Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 91–116.

modes of analysis not native to the tradition, this will only be a partial account. That is to say, without understanding what specific rituals, teachings, or practices mean to insiders, and how they operate within a wider system, such understanding will be incomplete and unrepresentative.[5]

We will find it useful here to take a short methodological detour into a bigger debate that goes to the very basis of the study of religion.

PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Through much of the twentieth century, phenomenology was the primary mode of conducting religious studies. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Ninian Smart (1927–2001), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) propounded and practiced phenomenology. We can describe it briefly as a method that tries to understand the nature of the world through objective study by simply looking at and describing phenomena (see box 2.3).

In the study of religion, phenomenology was often coupled with an empathetic approach, which meant, as Smart put it, walking a mile in another person's moccasins. That is to say, you were meant to approach things by putting aside own your preconcep-

BOX 2.4 **METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM**

Methodological agnosticism is often seen as a value free and neutral, even secular (see chapter 16), approach to the study of religion. It suspends any judgment on the truth, or otherwise, of transcendent claims, for example, whether deities exist, afterlife claims, and so on. As such, it ceases to be a theological enterprise based within confessional (insider) claims. Rather, one simply studies the human phenomena (linking to phenomenology). Some critical scholarship, however, suggests that it does not ask difficult questions about the maintenance of power structures and the way that all claims are part of the discourse that supports power structures (see chapter 5, especially boxes 5.1 and 5.2; see also box 2.7). For some, bracketing out certain questions may be overly deferential to religion, especially when associated with an empathetic approach that seeks to understand insider perspectives. This is indeed a danger, so must be held alongside a more critical perspective. However, some critical perspectives seem to advocate a methodological atheism (an implicit even if not explicit assumption that religious claims are "false"), which presupposes knowledge on cosmological/transcendent questions (see box 1.10 and case study 8A). Herein, it is suggested that a critical methodological agnosticism is the most tenable approach in the study of religion. This links with the arguments for methodological polymorphism in the introduction. However, it does not mean that claims are taken at face value or treated with reverence. We critically study the human claims and traditions that surround claims about the transcendent, variously envisaged.

tions, to see where the other came from, to allow a value-free description. This was often said to be combined with what was termed a methodological agnosticism (see box 2.4), so you made no judgments about the truth or falsity of the beliefs described. It was often held that phenomenology went alongside the possibility of actually knowing the other through the method of empathetic understanding. Such a method, in the German philosophical tradition, concerns " reliving" another's experience (*verstehen,* roughly, "understanding"). We address this issue further in the next section, but it becomes part of the critique of phenomenology to which we now turn.

SOME CRITICISMS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology has been subject to much criticism, especially from critical theory (see box 0.1 and chapter 5) and postmodernism (see box 2.5). Here, we will only note points useful for our discussion on the insider-outsider debate. One line of criticism is that there is no objective stance. We all come from somewhere, have certain beliefs (about the world, even if not religious beliefs per se), assume certain things are more natural than others, or have preferences for certain things over others. This cannot be put aside. In particular,

BOX 2.5 **WHAT ON EARTH IS POSTMODERNISM (AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE)?**

Postmodernism has no single meaning and is found across a wide range of disciplines from architecture to linguistics, the social sciences to philosophy. It is often suggested that any definition says more about the person defining it than about whatever "postmodernism" may be. Nevertheless, here we attempt a partial and relatively descriptive definition as systems of thought that see themselves as coming after, or "transcending/overcoming," modernity. This follows Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1924–1998) argument that whereas modernity/Enlightenment paradigms (see box 16.1) sought grand or universal explanations of the world and humanity (what he termed metanarratives), we now live in a time of "suspicion" against all such grand narratives of explanation.[1] We prefer localized and partial explanations, and stress the deferral of truth claims. (Stressing this definition as partial and inadequate amounts to a postmodern definition of postmodernism.) However, there is no single school of postmodernism (as is true of every school of thought).[2] Further, few thinkers these days claim to be postmodernists. However, it is important to understand that we live after (post)modernity. That is to say, claims about universal explanations are generally treated with suspicion, in the humanities and social sciences at least, though the physical sciences sometimes seek a unifying theory of everything. For some, living after (post)modernity manifests in what we term a (naive) "folk postmodernism" which advocates relativism. This assumes that the deferral of truth and localized knowing means any truth claims are "false." This is, however, incoherent: if it is "correct," then its own claims are not correct.[3] Other parts of this book demonstrate philosophical (see introduction and chapters 5 and 9) and theoretical (see chapters 7, 10, and 18) reasons behind this.

1 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on the Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2 See Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Keith Tester, *The Life and Times of Post-Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3 See Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*.

we should note that methodological atheism is itself a standpoint. Likewise, to assume that religion can be explained through a specific lens (sociological, psychological, scientific, etc.) means that we approach it with a perspective and tools that will emphasize certain things and not others, make us see certain things and not others, and prefer certain things and not others. There has also been a criticism of the way that many thinkers practiced phenomenology, especially figures like Otto and Eliade, whose theories were distinctly religious.[6] Their supposed neutrality of description often meant seeing, or privileging, particular aspects of traditions; their intent was to discern existing patterns in the data, but they may have created patterns instead (see chapter 11).

KNOWING THE OTHER

This discussion of phenomenology is relevant to our previous discussion on the insider-outsider because it leads us to ask questions about how we can know the other. This in turn involves asking questions about an abstract area of philosophy: epistemology (theories of knowledge). We need to address ways of knowing when we study religion. We will briefly see why:

- We may claim that outsider accounts are more objective as they will not have any confessional bias. However, everybody comes with their own worldview and preconceptions, so they will have some bias.
- We may claim that insider accounts are more reliable as they know what it feels like to be a member of that religion. However, all such accounts may be affected by their position due to gender (chapter 10), race (chapter 7 and box 18.6), or class (chapters 3 and 18). There is never only one insider account.
- We may therefore say that every account is relative, that there is no "truth," because it depends where you stand. However, there are many problems with this stance (see box 2.5 and chapter 9).

While raising quite abstract areas of philosophical thought about how we know things, it is essential to even think about what might have seemed a very basic question (but which we now know is not straightforward at all): whether somebody is a member of a religion (an insider), or not a member of that religion (an outsider).[7] Indeed, the question of who is, or is not, an insider of one religion may even be debated ("policed") by various insiders (and sometimes outsiders too), that is, whether all forms of belief, practice, or tradition are accepted.

Having raised these questions, we can ask where we stand on the issue of whether it is possible for us ever to come to an understanding of other religions (for those without one, then all religions are "other" to us)—and other cultures, nations (or states/regions), and so on. We can note the assumptions underlying three different ways of looking at the world:[8]

Open book: We can readily know people and cultures different from ourselves; we simply need to read them as we do everything around us. There are common human experiences which we can relate to. This represents a traditional way of thinking about knowledge and understanding. It assumes that reason, common sense, and human nature are reliable and simple guides.

Hidden codes: Other people and cultures are not readily obvious to us, but we can decipher them; people's outer beliefs or ideas may be based upon internal/psychological motivations which may even be unknown to them. We can discover structures in their society or thinking. This stance arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with social scientific and

psychological approaches. It suggests that human nature is not an open book, but can be opened with expert knowledge or skills.

Mirror of the self: We can never understand other people or cultures; our study actually misunderstands and imposes our own biases and prejudices. This represents late twentieth-century scholarly moves toward postmodern and critical stances which suggest that our cultural prejudice affects our knowledge (see box 7.3). It is often seen as a sophisticated and critical approach, but it may lead to incoherent relativism (see box 2.5).

We may not agree wholly with any one of these sets of assumptions. Or, depending on the context, we may find ourselves drawn to certain ones at different times. It goes beyond the intentions and possibility of this book to develop a complete theory of human understanding, but ad hoc discussions of hermeneutical philosophy (see box 2.6; see also box 0.2), materiality (chapter 9, especially boxes 9.1, 9.2, and 9.10), social constructionism (chapter 5, especially box 5.8), postcolonialism (chapter 7), and feminist thought (chapter 10) are used to build a theory of critical hermeneutical phenomenology (see the introduction). In brief, this means we do not naively adopt the "open book" stance, wholly endorse a "hidden codes" approach, or accept the relativism of an extreme "mirror of the self" approach. However, we may find in all three approaches valuable epistemological tools and lessons.

Importantly, the idea that we make mistakes does not show that all understanding is false or impossible. We can see this from our own experience. An example from my own life may be useful. When I first arrived in China, where I lived for several years, I often saw groups of people engaged in, what seemed to me, arguments at the end of the meal. I assumed that either nobody wanted to pay the bill, or else there was always an argument about how much each should pay according to who drank more beer (this was in a city called Harbin, famous for its excellent beer) or how much each had eaten. It was only later, as I came to better understand Chinese culture (and language), that I realized it was an argument about "face." That is to say, it was not an argument about not paying, but a competition of everyone wanting to pay. They would show their "seniority" within a group by being the one picking up the tab!

We can probably all think of similar misunderstandings we have had—at home or overseas—when we do not know what is going on. As an important theoretical note, the question of language and bodies is key here. For often when we do not understand the words, we may try and interpret the body language, which can lead to us stereotyping or reading our own preconceptions into the way that others behave (see box 9.8; see also 7.4).[9] However, in my example, I only knew my initial idea was mistaken because I later actually understood what the arguments were about. A failure to understand, or imperfect understandings, do not mean that all understanding is always wrong! Indeed, the claim that all understanding is false assumes the person making that claim has some bird's-eye position beyond the world whereby they can make this judgment—how

BOX 2.6 PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND UNDERSTANDING

Philosophical hermeneutics (see box 0.2) emphasizes human understanding and interpretation.[1] Importantly, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) argued that "prejudices" do not have to be seen as negative. Rather, he suggests, they are the basis for our knowing anything. We put new information in relation to things we already know; otherwise we would simply be unable to comprehend anything. Our prejudices can sometimes be seen as positive forms of preconceptions. For instance, if we have seen horses, we have some context into which we can make sense of a zebra when we see one. If we have never seen any four-legged animal, or an animal which eats grass, then we would surely struggle to conceptualize a zebra (or a horse). Gadamer, though, sees some prejudices as more helpful than others, because some can close down new knowledge (if we already assume we know everything about a subject) or cause us to misinterpret (if we put new things only in relation to what we know, rather than expanding our knowledge and understanding). If, for instance, we said the zebra must be a horse which someone had painted, we would not understand it very well. Meanwhile, both Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) have theorized the issue of translation, that is, how not just words, but concepts, from another language/culture can be interpreted in our own. Ricoeur speaks of the "agony of translation," yet notes its possibility: understanding does occur across worldviews and languages (see introduction and chapter 1, especially boxes 1.7 and 1.8).[2] This barely touches the surface of hermeneutical philosophy, but indicates that our limited capacity as humans to get beyond our prejudices does not mean we must be relativist (see introduction, boxes 2.5, 5.8, and chapter 9). Importantly, "prejudice" is used, in this case, very differently from its general usage to talk about attitudes linked to stereotyping and discrimination.[3]

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1 See Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* trans. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008 [1976]).

2 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Theory and Method,* trans. William Glen-Doepl (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979); Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Paul Hedges, "Deconstructing Religion: Where We Go from Here—A Hermeneutical Proposal," *Exchange* 47.1 (2018): 5–24; Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016): 5–26; and Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014), 119–56.

3 On the scholarship on prejudice, relating specifically to religion, see Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), especially chapter 1.

else would they know? Certainly, it may be suggested we always have partial knowledge, never reaching a final determination, such that we always defer absolute claims. But this is very different from suggesting that all knowledge or claims are entirely, or equally, inadequate. Rather, we must be questioning, even of ourselves, our societies, and our sources of knowledge (including questioning the claims of this book!).

BEING REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONERS

The moves from what are often seen as modern and Enlightenment worldviews (see box 16.1) toward those which come afterwards, sometimes dubbed postmodernity, have impacted how we think we know (epistemology). We can note two positions:

Positivism: Positivists generally assert that pure reason, and our language about it, can examine readily available phenomena in the world and provide accurate and transparent descriptions of that reality.

Relativism: Relativists hold that rather than being universal, reason is always particular and bound to cultural and linguistic traditions. Our upbringing, language, and culture give us preconceptions, which means we are always culturally bound, and so cannot describe the world in a neutral way.

To mediate between these, we can speak about the need to be reflexive. This means to be aware of the cultural and linguistic baggage and prejudice which we all carry with us.[10] Meanwhile, we also exercise what is often called a hermeneutics of suspicion (see box 2.7). We ask questions about both our own categories and those of others. This is not to say that we never understand across linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries, as stressed earlier.

Oddbjørn Leirvik has argued that we need always to recognize "the researcher's, the teacher's and the student's role as *agents* in the spaces between. Agency means being implicated in negotiations of power, both within the religious traditions and between them."[11] His point is that there is not some clear "outsider" space which is not involved in creating discourse about religion and what this means. Therefore, Leirvik continues, "self-critical reflection on one's own agency is called for."[12] We all come laden with cultural and personal baggage, epistemological views, and preconceptions which color our understandings. We can never simply sit back and look at other people's position from some vantage point that makes things clear to us. We are all insiders to some other discourse or standpoint.

A FURTHER REFLECTION ON WHERE WE STAND

Mentioned at a number of points in this text is the question of language. Here, it is worth thinking how a particular English, and more broadly European, heritage is part of how we know and think. Our language, to some extent at least, shapes our world (see introduc-

BOX 2.7 THE REFLEXIVE TURN AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

It is often asserted that traditional modes of knowledge, especially those associated with the European Enlightenment/modernity (see box 16.1), assumed that the world was straightforward for us: our words related directly to the world out there as-it-is. Pure and universal language and reason took us to assured and certain knowledge. Often associated with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), it is something of a stereotype (see box 5.2). Contrasting with this, from at least the late twentieth century (but relying on earlier work), various thinkers have suggested we should be suspicious of our assumptions about what reason is, what cultural norms affect our thinking, and our own preconceptions, particularly concerning the possibility that we can ever be neutral or objective. This is associated with a range of trends such as social constructionism (see chapter 5), feminist critiques of the gender bias in the construction of knowledge (see chapter 10), and postcolonial critiques of Western norms (see chapter 7), as well as postmodernism (see box 2.5). The requirement for us to be reflexive, to critically question our own experiences, as a trend in thought, has been dubbed the reflexive turn. It is our questioning of our thought and suspicion about what seems natural or obvious to us. We can link it to a term coined by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005): the hermeneutics of suspicion. This means that our interpretation of the world (our hermeneutical strategy) is marked by questioning and seeking to look behind the immediate, "natural," or "commonsense" answers we have. Although associated by Ricoeur with his so-called masters of suspicion, who challenged our ways of thinking around the late nineteenth century (see box 5.2), one scholar suggests that the hermeneutics of suspicion is nothing but "a tautological way of saying what thoughtful people have always known, that words may not always mean what they seem to mean."[1] This is partly true, and in broad terms, it has correlations with the ideas of such figures as Socrates and Kant (see box 5.2). But the hermeneutics of suspicion implies more than simply questioning. It names an approach that seeks to unmask the assumptions and power dynamics in concepts and assertions.[2]

1 Christopher Bryan, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," in *Listening to the Bible: The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Christopher Bryan and David Landon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–39, 23.

2 See Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal* 15.1 (2012), http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431.

tion and chapters 1, 5, 7, and 9). In relation to this, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has noted that a classical statement of Western philosophy, "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*), which relies upon the notion of "thinking" in a particular way, cannot be stated in the African Akan philosophical tradition. Drawing from Kwasi Wiredu, he notes that "thinking" means "measuring something" in the Akan tradition, which cannot be tied to "being" (I am) in the same way. In Akan, the closest linguistic equivalent would be something like "I am there," implying not the solitary "I" of internal experience, but an

embodied self in relation to a wider world.[13] As such, a certain lineage has shaped our world, requiring what Wiredu has termed a "conceptual decolonization."[14] This dominance of knowledge is not simply about English/Western dominance in the last couple of centuries (see chapter 7), for Western working-class or non-elite knowledge and practices have also been dismissed (see chapter 3), and gender bias is evident (see chapter 10). The term "kyriarchy," the dominance of elites, may help express this (see box 10.9). Knowledge of such perspectives can help us see what we may not currently be able to see, and keep aware of the perspectival nature of our own standpoints.

SUMMATION

This detour through phenomenology, theories of knowledge (epistemology), and theories and methods of interpretation (hermeneutics) has been necessary for us to come back to our questions on the insider-outsider debate. Let us briefly set out some key points:

- We cannot, without any qualification or justification, claim that an outsider approach is more objective (unbiased) than an insider one.
- We cannot simply be relativist and say that any insider's or any outsider's stance is simply as good, or bad, as any other. Some positions make more sense.
- We can credibly claim that it is possible to understand another person or tradition. Not perfectly, but at least adequately. The claim that we cannot supposes that the person making that claim fully understands that other person, and so can be the ultimate judge of other people's misunderstanding!
- We can have meaningful discussions and understanding across not just insider and outsider claims, but also across differing insider and outsider claims.
- A reflexive approach is needed, in which we are self-questioning toward our own preconceptions, but we do not deny the possibility of adequate knowledge.

BEING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

CHALLENGING INSIDER-OUTSIDER DISTINCTIONS

As discussed above, insider and outsider are not necessarily distinct poles, despite the fact that people very often identify very strongly with one or the other. For instance, if asked, many people will typically say "I am a Christian," "I am a Buddhist," "I am an atheist," or "I am spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) (see box 2.8). However, we can further complicate this by asking whether we see polar opposites between those who are religious and those who are not religious.

- Do *all* Daoists, Muslims, Buddhists, Confucians, Jains, Pagans, and Sikhs similarly fit into one class of religious insiders while *all* atheists, freethinkers, and Humanists belong to another class of non-religious outsiders?

BOX 2.8 **THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS (SBNR) AND (RELIGIOUS) "NONES"**

Increasingly, many people globally do not identify with any religious tradition but, nevertheless, may not identify as either atheist or agnostic.[1] These people are often identified as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), a category that overlaps with those termed the (religious) "nones." Nones are those who, for census purposes, list their religion as "none" (of the above), but may not be non-religious (see case study 8A). Nones often represent a significant number of people who are recording, on censuses and surveys, their religious affiliation as unaffiliated to any particular religious tradition. Neither the SBNR nor the "nones" are opposed to everything we may categorize as "religion" or "religious," though they may prefer to identify as "spiritual."[2] In this context, "spiritual" implies a rejection of institutional traditions, that is, "religion," but often an acceptance of such things as meditation, yoga, or forms of ecological spirituality (see box 5.6). The data suggests that the decline of religious belonging may not therefore be a decline of religiosity per se (see chapter 16). This clearly relates to debates on how we frame such terms as religion (see chapter 1).

1 See Becka Alper, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," *Pew Research Center* (8 August 2018), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/.

2 See Graham Harvey, *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 23–42, 55–56; Andie Alexander and Russell McCutcheon, "I Am Spiritual but Not Religious," in *Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés*, ed. Craig Martin and Brad Stoddard (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 97–112; and Lois Lee, *Recognising the Non-Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

- What about the spiritual but not religious (SBNR)?
- What about the Buddhist who insists her tradition is an atheist one that has no God, and claims Buddhism is a philosophy? Who must be seen alongside the Buddhist who reveres the Bodhisattva Guanyin and treats her as a deity (see box 2.9)?
- What about the Confucian who says her tradition has no "supernatural" elements and is simply a philosophy, but which historically has related to cosmological concepts like Heaven (*tian*) and the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji*)?

We have many problems coming to a definition of religion, with many gray border areas (see chapter 1), which makes the insider-outsider division itself murkier than we first assumed.

A further issue is that being an insider or an outsider is not simply about things we define as "religion." We are all inside or outside many communities, identities, or groups. These may involve gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, political allegiance, and so on. Do working-class Catholics and working-class atheists have more in common

BOX 2.9 **WHO IS GUANYIN?**

Guanyin (in Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara; in Japanese, Kwannon) is the most revered figure of East Asian religiosity. Technically a bodhisattva (according to Mahayana Buddhism an awakened being who puts off entry to nirvana to assist others), she is generally seen as a Chinese goddess in popular devotion. She is, in orthodox elite representations, an assistant to Amida Buddha (technically buddhas outrank bodhisattvas), but in most temples her shrine is more revered than his. Notably, since about the twelfth century, she has (almost universally) been portrayed (in the Sinitic Buddhist world) as female, but is understood as male, even though in elite Buddhism a bodhisattva is beyond gender. Devotion to her is found outside Buddhism and throughout East and Southeast Asia.[1]

A Chinese goddess and/or the Bodhisattva Guanyin, Lian Shan Shuang Lin Temple, Singapore.

1 See Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśhvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Paul Hedges, "The Identity of Guanyin: Religion, Convention, and Subversion," *Culture and Religion* 13.1 (2012): 91–106; and C. N. Tay, "Kuan-yin: The Cult of Half Asia," *History of Religions* 16.2 (1976): 147–77.

with each other than the former have with middle-class Hindus, and the latter with middle-class Humanists? These and other factors need to be considered:

> Variables such as gender, ethnicity, region, class and other matters all play a part. For instance, a Western scholar who seeks an emic understanding of the religious culture of a Hindu (ex)-untouchable, or Dalit . . . will find himself an Outsider . . . on account of religion . . . class and ethnicity. . . . If we consider a movement like Santeria, a fusion of Roman Catholicism and African traditional religions . . . we may find that many Insiders within Roman Catholicism . . . may experience greater difficulties relating to and understanding this system than many others, perhaps those who share the cultural and social origins that gave rise to Santeria even if they do not practise it (i.e. black slaves).[15]

This quote suggests that some types of "insiderness" may actually make it less easy to understand other "insiders." Indeed, some have noted that often splits and divisions within traditions can be more bitter than those between traditions.[16] For instance, many Christians do not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses' claims to be Christians, while Catholic and Protestant Christians are sometimes in violent antagonism. Some divisions within Islam can lead to animosity, whether this is between Sunni and Shia, or both of these with Ahmadiyya, who many Muslims say are not Muslims.

CONVERSION AND INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

Questions of mission, conversion, and interreligious (including non-religious) relations are also places where insider-outsider debates occur. Sometimes converts' narratives are used to highlight perceived failings of their original home tradition. For instance, for some, criticisms by former Muslims like Ayaan Hirsi Ali are found to be particularly compelling.[17] Her critique suggests that Islam is inherently repressive of women and non-Muslims. Do such figures carry "greater insider insight," or should we apply a hermeneutics of suspicion (see box 2.7) to their narratives? Converts (or ex-members) may well want to explain why they converted (left), therefore criticizing their old tradition, which, obviously, they found in some ways inadequate. Such accounts are quite common in many traditions, where converts from another religion are used to reinforce narratives of the superiority of the religion converted to (or to atheism) to existing insiders, as well as to glean missionary information, that is, how to make appeals to others in the convert's old religion.

MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Another issue to raise in relation to the standard conception of the insider and outsider as dichotomous poles is what is variously termed multiple religious belonging or identity (or dual religious belonging, hybrid identities, etc.). This is the phenomenon of belonging to, or identifying with, more than one religion. Here, we will call this "multiple religious

identity" (MRI). The world religions paradigm makes it appear natural to assume that people can only (properly) belong to just one religion. However, this does not reflect the way that much of the world has made sense of being religious. In East Asia, the vast majority of people do not claim a single religious identity. Rather, they have engaged in what has been termed strategic religious participation (SRP) (see box 13.1). They employ the resources of a range of religious traditions as seems most beneficial, or is culturally determined.[18] Within medieval China, someone in need of an exorcist may have sought out a Daoist from the Celestial Masters lineage, a Buddhist monk for funerals, or any passing itinerant ritual expert for rites at the village shrine. This phenomenon seems to be becoming increasingly common in contemporary Western contexts today as well.[19] We see different patterns globally.

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CASE STUDY 2A. LIVING BETWEEN RELIGIOUS WORLDS: CONVERSION AND RECONVERSION

The question of conversion, and even multiple conversions or reconversion, raises a specific issue for imagining a binary between insider and outsider. If somebody converts to another religious tradition, or becomes an atheist, do they still have some insider perspective to their original tradition? If we defined insider-outsider as simply allegiance/belonging, the answer would be no. However, we may hold that being an insider has some qualitative aspect. Certainly, the convert may be held to have some "authority" to demonstrate the inadequacy of their original tradition. They can say why it is inadequate even from an "insider" point of view.

INTRODUCING PAUL WILLIAMS

Paul Williams is professor emeritus (retired) of Indian and Tibetan philosophy at the University of Bristol, UK. As an academic, he is best known for his work on the Buddhist tradition, especially Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. In his youth, he was brought up within the Anglican (Episcopalian) Christian tradition, but he converted to Buddhism in his twenties and remained a Buddhist for over twenty years before converting to Catholic Christianity. We could either speak of his reconversion to Christianity, or, as he seems to do, of his conversion to a new denomination. The question of Williams's insider or outsider status to various traditions is therefore an interesting case. Coupled with the fact that he is also a scholar of Buddhism, we can ask how his academic work intersects with his religious insider and outsider statuses.

Williams was born in Exeter, a city in the southwest of England. He was a nominal Anglican who did not take his tradition and its beliefs and practices seriously, though he participated in his church choir. This raises an issue within insider-outsider debates about what claims to affiliation or membership actually mean. He studied philosophy at

the University of Sussex and developed a particular interest in non-Western philosophy. This led him to Oxford University, where he undertook a doctorate in Indian and Buddhist philosophy.

Williams found Buddhism more than intellectually stimulating; he drifted toward a religious affiliation. In his accounts of this period, Williams suggests that this was something of a journey. He remained a Buddhist for around twenty-eight years, specifically in a Tibetan Buddhist lineage. This raises another query about the insider-outsider issue; normally conversions do not happen overnight or in an instant, though there are reports of sudden conversions. Rather, Williams's insider relationship to Buddhism was a gradually developing one, without us being able to say at a specific point that he was not Buddhist one day, but was the next day.

As an academic, Williams wrote some excellent research on Buddhism, and one of his books, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition,* is a standard work.[20] It shows a deep and sophisticated understanding of the tradition. Therefore, we can speak of Williams's work as exhibiting an outsider stance: scholarly analysis. His insider status, though, was of interest to some students, including Buddhist monks, who came to study under him (particularly at the PhD level) because he was both a significant scholar of Buddhism and a well-known Buddhist, leading meditation retreats, but not holding any formal religious leadership position.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

Williams describes a religious need which was not met within Buddhism; hence his conversion to Catholicism. Like his conversion to Buddhism, this was not an overnight decision, but involved several years of deliberation. We may therefore ask questions about his status as an insider or outsider to both Buddhism and Christianity during this period. Certainly, as he moved toward feeling that Catholicism had what he yearned for, and that Buddhism did not, we do not see a simple jump from one to the other. The insider-outsider position does not switch at some clear point. Rather, at some point, could we say he was an insider to both traditions? Of course, there was a formal initiation—confirmation into the Catholic tradition. However, before this Williams no longer understood himself as a Buddhist. Formal initiations, such as confirmation into Christianity, or taking the Buddhist Three Refuges (*triratna*), do not necessarily mark the move from "outsiderness" to "insiderness." They may mark a formal point of entry, but rest upon (assuming they are sincere) a prior sense of commitment to the tradition. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate them as performative and enacting a social change (see chapter 12).

Williams retained his academic role, teaching and researching Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. Would the conversion to Catholicism make any difference to him as a scholar? Academically, it would seem not. The second edition of *Buddhist Thought,* published after his conversion to Catholicism, does not mark a change in his interpretation of that tradition. However, when he speaks of Buddhism as a Catholic, his description of

Buddhism seems to shift dramatically from his scholarly presentations.[21] In this mode, it can be argued, he presents a "negative" view of Buddhism based on an "antiquated" interpretation of that tradition, making claims that

- Buddhism is essentially pessimistic—a view propagated by some Western philosophers in the nineteenth century, but widely refuted.
- Buddhism is self-centered and noncommunal—a problematic representation which does not account for the central place of the community (*sangha*) in Buddhism.
- Buddhism is simply subjective (all based in your own mind and so is introverted and solipsistic)—a claim refuted by Williams's academic work.

We could surmise why he speaks this way, but we cannot access Williams's own personal thoughts. Notably, though, some of his former Buddhist students have been personally hurt, or even feel betrayed, by him leaving Buddhism and his new depictions of it.

REFLECTIONS

It would be useful to ask some questions to consider the issues:

1. As a student, would you prefer to study (at undergraduate or postgraduate level) with a scholar who did or did not share your religion (or non-religious option), or identified with the religion taught? Does the professor's affiliation affect their academic credibility or understanding?
2. Can we speak of Williams being both an insider and an outsider to specific traditions leading up to and around his various conversions? What does this mean for how we think about these terms?
3. Should we see varying degrees of "insiderness" and "outsiderness" as being a better way of speaking, rather than simply being an insider or an outsider?
4. Does conversion mean that you can no longer look objectively at a tradition you were previously an insider to? Think about this in relation to the way that Williams speaks about Buddhism when speaking as an insider to Catholicism. But also consider his work as a scholar.

CASE STUDY 2B. HINDU AND CHRISTIAN? MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

That people may belong to, or identify with, several different religious traditions is simply an empirical fact. However, many scholars inspired by the world religions paradigm (WRP) model have assumed that such multiple religious identities (MRI) are somehow doing religion wrong. Here, we will explore the case of the Catholic Christian monastic Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), who comes from a tradition that traditionally considers such MRI as impossible. We also briefly consider the contemporary context.

BEDE GRIFFITHS AS HINDU AND CHRISTIAN

Griffiths lived a fairly conventional English middle-class life, developing a deep interest in his Anglican Christian identity under the influence of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) while a student at Oxford University. However, in 1931, he became a Catholic Christian, after reading John Henry Newman's (1801–1890) work, and became a monk at Prinknash Abbey the following year. Various events saw him going, in 1955, to India, and there he became greatly influenced by monks who had already started living in ways typical of Hindu holy men (*sadhu*). This involved wearing saffron robes rather than a Western monk's habit, living in an *ashram* (traditional Hindu ascetic communities), studying Hindu philosophy, and even engaging in Hindu-inspired forms of practice and meditation.[22] In 1958, Griffiths established a Christian *ashram* called Kurisumala. However, he was best known for his role at the *ashram* of Shantivanam, where he arrived in 1968. It was founded by a monk known as Abhistikananda (Henri Le Saux, 1910–1973), whose teachings were influential for Griffiths and others. Abhistikananda's description of an experience while practicing Advaita Vedanta meditation is famous.[23] He had the "*advaita* experience": feeling his own self/soul merging with God/the divine such that they were one and undifferentiated. For a Christian monk who believed in God as the Trinity and creator of humanity, this was hard for Abhistikananda to reconcile on an intellectual level. Nevertheless, he could not deny his experience of union with the divine.

For Griffiths, a dramatic experience occurred in 1990 when he suffered a stroke, and had what he termed an experience of the divine feminine. He spoke of this as being linked to Hindu goddesses but also in Christian terms as relating to Mary and the Holy Spirit. While both Griffiths and Abhistikananda remained firm in their Christian identity, both were also deeply imbued within Hindu thought and practice. Could they be spoken of as Hindus and Christians? Notably, this is distinct from the Chinese context, where people would not see any dissonance or conflict in using, or in some sense belonging to, different traditions (see box 13.1). However, in their context, both these monks were aware that they were seeking reconciliation between what are seen as two separate and distinct religions, and even conflicting ways of experiencing what it means to be religious.

MRI TODAY

The cases of Griffiths and Abhistikananda are far from unique. Increasingly, Christians around the world practice forms of Hindu or Buddhist meditation or contemplation. Some describe themselves in dual terms (e.g., as Buddhist Christians), and some are initiated into both traditions and are recognized as members (insiders) of each tradition by other insiders.[24] Others, who may identify by such terms as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), see no problem with identifying with, or using practices from, a range of different traditions. Yet they may not see themselves as insiders to any specific tradition. In such situations, how do we think about the concepts of insider and outsider?

REFLECTIONS

Some questions may help clarify specific issues:

1. Griffiths had both Hindu critics (who thought he was using his *ashram* as a covert way to make converts by tricking them into becoming Christians) and Christian critics (who thought he had betrayed his Christian faith by becoming too Hindu). Assuming a stance opposing such views, show how you would seek to answer critics. Or, take the stance of one such critic, and show how you would advance these arguments in a substantive way.
2. Can somebody be an insider to two traditions at the same time? If you say no, how do you account for the simple fact that some people do this? If you say yes, how do you account for the fact that today many traditions say it is not possible?
3. Bede and Abhistikananda remained primarily Christians, so insiders to that tradition. To what extent may we also speak of them as insiders to Hinduism?
4. In something like the Chinese context, or with the contemporary SBNR phenomenon, where somebody may make use of particular rituals, practices, or religious professionals but not have a confessional sense of identity or belonging to a tradition, should we speak of that person as an insider to the traditions with which they engage? Or do they have any "insiderness"? If not, what is going on?

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QUESTIONS AND CONNECTING THOUGHTS

The terminology of insider-outsider has been imagined as a natural and simple conceptualization to explain the situation of devotees/religious practitioners as opposed to "nonbelievers"/scholars. However, on many levels, the simple dichotomy does not work. A female atheist doctor may find she has much in common with a female Baha'i lawyer based on a shared sense of being an insider to the category of gender, or perhaps a shared LGBTQI identity. This also raises a range of questions which intersect with other chapters, including how our conception of religion affects how we imagine religious borders (chapter 1), which in turn will include issues about interreligious relations (chapter 13). We have also raised questions about how we know or understand across boundaries, which intersects with issues in social constructionism (chapter 5), gender and feminist thought (chapter 10), materiality (chapter 9), colonialism (chapter 7), and politics (chapter 18). Indeed, the fundamental nature of these questions about how we know, and therefore how we understand religion and its borders, can be seen as relating to all aspects of this text. Hence, they are placed in the first section of this book, where we deal with some foundational questions about what religion is and how we study it. To help think through some of the issues raised, we can ask the following questions:

1. What is your own experience of being an insider/outsider in relation to a religious tradition you belong to or are familiar with?
2. Do you think we should keep the terms "insider-outsider" as useful markers despite their problems, abandon them altogether, or modify them to speak about things like degrees of insiderness and outsiderness?
3. How can you apply a hermeneutics of suspicion and reflexivity to your own prejudices? (Remember that Gadamer does not see "prejudice" as "negative," because it also represents the possibility of our learning, see box 2.6.)
4. Is the notion of insider-outsider a clear divide between being a member of a religious group (insider) and not being a member of a religious group (outsider)? Or, are we always inside and outside many different standpoints, traditions, and worldviews? If so, how significant is this distinction?
5. Giving examples to clarify your position, argue whether it is possible for someone in a particular religion to ever understand someone in another religion.
6. Can outsiders sometimes understand things better, or more clearly, than an insider, and vice versa?

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