2.8
FIELD RESEARCH
Participant observation

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Chapter summary

- Fieldwork is the best approach to research about the lived reality and/or performance of religion.
- The core method of fieldwork is participant observation, sometimes supported by interviews and other qualitative methods.
- Fieldwork results in rich description of religious activities that is theoretically informed and contributes significantly to academic debate.
- The history and recent practice of fieldwork in religious studies provides examples for neophyte and experienced researchers.
- Participation, presence, reflexivity and dialogue are key themes in recent discussions of fieldwork practice.
- Fieldwork approaches to religious people and activities include gaining rapport, practicing epoché, building and maintaining empathy, paying attention, being present, recording and analyzing data, dialogue about emerging understandings, and polishing the literary and other presentations of results.

Introduction

Researchers who conduct field research seek to understand religious phenomena by participating as fully as possible while observing and reflecting on what people do. More than seeking merely to describe religious activities, they are involved in a process with rich and radical implications for scholarly engagement with religion. The ideological justification of fieldwork strongly indicates that scholars should focus most on observable activities, actual events and practice, rather than on what texts, preachers or even 'ordinary' participants assert people ought to do. While they will pay attention to people's ambitions to live up to some exalted, authoritative version of what a religion should be, it is 'what people do' that engages fieldwork researchers. They may also ask questions about religious texts and the 'tradition' that forms the model of how a religion 'should be'—but the purpose of such questions will be an attempt to better understand people's experiences and interpretations. Religion, from this

perspective, is not properly understood without attention to its fully embodied, materialized, local and varying practice: its vernacular or lived reality. By implication, academic understanding is best sought by scholars who are willing and able to participate reasonably fully in the field of performance and experience that they research. By entering the 'field' of religious life, performance and community, researchers seek to contribute to academic knowledge and debate. This chapter about fieldwork research among religious people uses the subtitle 'participant observation' to draw attention to the central ways of doing fieldwork.

Field researchers may draw from a suite of methods for gaining understanding of three related but not identical complexes. The first is 'what people do', what happens when people enact religion in everyday or ceremonial life. The second is what religious participants understand, say, intend and/or value about their own religious activities (and, perhaps, those of others). The third is what researchers experience as participants and as people informed by previous scholarly work that they deem or discover to be relevant in seeking understanding. In addition to various forms of observation, field researchers might also use interviews, surveys, questionnaires, video analysis and/or a suite of other techniques to increase the value of their deep engagement with a particular group, community or practice, and their reflection on the knowledge they gain by participation.

Fieldwork is conducted with a view to producing results that are not merely accurately descriptive of circumscribed phenomena, but, more significantly, contribute to relevant academic debates in significant ways. Thus, the collection of data and information in the 'field' requires researchers to attempt to get as close as they can to the 'doing' of religion while maintaining a focus on scholarly objectives. Field researchers do not aim to write about everything that religious people do or say, nor even about all the things experienced during research. Various levels of selection are applied to seeking out, observing and considering the relevance of particular events and/or practices. Then the researcher's task is to translate observations and reflections on what happens among religious people into analyzed data of value to colleagues who need to understand them but cannot be present. In practice, this can involve different ways of recording data and then re-working it into publishable outcomes. This chapter will introduce field research, say something about practicalities and techniques, discuss some of the complexities and contests around researchers' relationships with religious practitioners, and illustrate various ways in which practices have evolved from participant observation to enrich academic knowledges and debates. It is structured in a series of layers that elaborate on similar and related points to develop familiarity with important matters.

Participating and observing

Field research in the study of religion is the practice of observing religious groups, communities or activities, sometimes for sustained periods of time, sometimes in a series of shorter visits. It entails attempting to understand as fully as possible what people do, when, where, how and (possibly) why they do it. It attends in particular to the performance of religion, in both everyday and ceremonial occasions. It is open to a wide interpretation of what might be worthy of research: it is not only about religious rituals or discourses but may attend to seemingly mundane issues that impinge on people's lives, acts and ideas. (The question of what counts as 'religion' can be quite acute but it can also provoke researchers to contest the ghettoizing of their subject matter as metaphysics or 'peculiar ideas and strange rituals'.) Even when it is focused on a particular ritual, fieldwork is particularly good for seeking understanding of whole events from the preparation to the aftermath. Fieldwork requires researchers to establish sufficient **rapport** to be given access to all that this might involve. It can involve

attempts to gain precise experiential, phenomenological knowledge that only participation can provide. It is also the key method for pursuing selected, focused questions about scholarly interests in religious activities and lives.

Fieldwork takes various forms that could be represented as a spectrum from observation to participation, perhaps in phases. Sometimes while in the religious 'field', among religious practitioners, researchers attempt to observe without intruding too much on what would happen if they were not there. They might watch what full participants do, but from the margins, unobtrusively, without trying to act as others do, and without acting as if they were religious themselves. On other occasions, or as practiced by other researchers, scholars in the field may appear indistinguishable from other participants. They might seek to experience everything that the people they are researching experience: the fully sensual, embodied, imaginative, ecstatic and/or ordinary performance of religious life. Perhaps researchers are more attentive than they would be if they were members of the group. Or, if not more attentive, they are at least differently attentive, considering scholarly questions even as they participate and observe. Particularly in early phases, they will seek to learn what is normal and proper behavior for the particular group. They may seek to understand what religious people take for granted or what they mean by what they do. Certainly researchers will reflect on the value, importance or significance of what they and others are experiencing.

The largely synonymous term for the most common style of field research is 'participant observation'. It was coined by anthropologists and most obviously points to the evolution of methods founded on the idea that scholars should not rely on second-hand reports but should spend time among people, gathering first-hand data. Initially, it is implied, researchers might have thought of themselves as people who observed others who were 'participants' in the observed activity or 'culture' (a term that anthropologists have argued about as much as scholars of religion have argued about 'religion'). Observation required distance and resulted in objective analysis rather than in subjective impressions or experiences. However, the full richness of people's lives or culture demanded more than observation from the margins.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) is often considered the founder, or at least the first rigorous developer and vociferous champion of fieldwork in anthropology. Indeed, he asserted the absolute necessity of living among people for extended periods in order to learn about them and their culture, also insisting that 'by dwelling mentally for some time among people of a much simpler culture than our own we may be able to see ourselves from a distance, we may be able to gain a new sense of proportion with regard to our own institutions, beliefs, and customs' (Malinowski 1954: 145). Whether the goal of research is to understand others or ourselves continues to be discussed (and both may be properly pursued), Malinowski's example became the norm in anthropology. Doctoral students expected to spend a year, at least (in addition to any time spent learning a local or useful language), elsewhere, immersed in cultures foreign to them. In short, fieldwork researchers had to seek to 'be there' for long periods, and therefore developed ways of participating while observing, or 'participant observation'.

Fieldwork conducted by scholars of religion only rarely entails long-term dwelling among those whom researchers wish to observe. Most often it involves only periodic or regular observation of significant events or processes. (Such episodes of fieldwork may be supported by more or less formal interviews or surveys that elicit different kinds of information that can be triangulated or compared with the results of participant observation.) However, this is not to suggest that periodic visits among religious people are undertaken casually. Rather, the point is that scholars of religion rarely attempt anything comparable to the classic anthropological ambition of understanding and writing about the whole culture of a group. Even

anthropologists now typically focus on specific elements of cultures. Like any kind of research, the study of religions approach to fieldwork must be suitable to the phenomena of interest. So, although religious people can or do live their whole lives 'religiously', it is common for research to focus on particular activities that can be observed in a number of visits (some lasting longer than others) over a more extended period. It is true, too, that scholars of religion perform fieldwork in order to do more than observe the brief high points of an event or ritual's denouement. They typically appreciate that the full complexity of events usually demands more sustained presence and involvement. To understand a religion as it is performed, researchers need to become thoroughly familiar with a group or community both as they prepare for or reflect on specific events and as they live out their religion more generally. The addition of 'participation' to 'observation', therefore, signals this necessity of gaining familiarity with people and their activities.

Box 2.8.1 Stages in the fieldwork process

- Deciding who/where to research
- Introducing oneself/meeting people
- Conducting a pilot study (optionally)
- Fieldwork, e.g. participant observation and recording:
  - Recording/notes and diaries
  - Turning records into drafts
  - Checking ideas with (other) participants
  - Refining ideas in dialogue
- Further phases of fieldwork
- Polishing the written and other outputs

Presence and reflection

Fieldwork and participant observation practice and theory have developed since the early 20th century. A turn towards 'writing culture' (the title of an influential book edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, 1986) from the 1970s to the early 1990s evidenced a shift from treating fieldwork and 'writing-up' as separate, sequential activities to understanding that ethnographers are, as that term indicates, people who write (or speak words) about cultures. That is, even while 'in the field' researchers are constructing literate (and eventually literary) presentations of their experiences and reflections among other people. This alteration in understanding academic activities encouraged a more fluent literary polishing of academic publications and an increase in reflections about scholarly presence in their accounts of research. This last trend resonates with other developments, e.g. the rise of feminist, anti-colonial, phenomenological and indigenous scholarship (especially since 1990), and of widespread reflection on what worked well in the field. As researchers discovered the positive benefits of more fully participative and more experiential presence, they also asserted (in their research practice and their publications) the value of **dialogical, reflexive** and discursive methods and techniques. As Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik and Karla Poewe (1996) insist, 'methods of presence' will continue to be central to the 'anthropological project of comprehending the world' and, by extension, to fieldwork about religion (Hastrup and Hervik 1994: 3).

Discussion of 'reflexivity and the study of belief' in a special issue of the journal *Western Folklore* casts further light on these tensions between different ways of performing research. In introducing the issue, David Hufford contrasts reflexivity both with 'methodolatry'—which 'tries to recapture the confidence of positivism by deriving a set of rules specifying a "correct" way of doing ethnography that can yield true representations of the world'—and with postmodernism—which 'abandons notions of objectivity altogether and treats ethnographic representation as literary construction that tells about its authors rather than about the world' (Hufford 1995a: 2–3). Reflexivity achieves something else because reflexive scholars act differently to positivists and postmodernists. In seeking to understand what religious people do, think, feel and say, they reflect both on the data presented to them and on their own presence, responses, impressions, experiences and power. Hufford defines 'reflexivity' as:

> a metaphor from grammar indicating a relationship of identity between subject and object, thus meaning the inclusion of the actor (scholar, author, observer) in the account of the act and/or its outcomes. In this sense reflexivity shows that all knowledge [including that of scholars] is 'subjective'.
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> *(Hufford 1995b: 57)*

He concludes that the application of questioning to ourselves and our scholarly 'knowledge-making' is vital to our work of explicating what we know about others. Discussion that presents our reflections on our encounters and experiences will provide a 'more accurate sense of where we are, because it will always require us to tell how we got there' (Hufford 1995b: 74). These thoughts may not meet complete agreement from every fieldworker, but they do convey a sense of what is shared by researchers committed to engaging with lived religion as reflexive scholarly participants.

To summarize the argument so far: methods of recording information, reflections and analysis are integral to fieldwork. They make explicit the selectivity, refinement or focusing that is central to the whole approach. The intentions, processes and products of fieldwork are not complete, exhaustive, final statements about a discrete entity ('religion' or 'Buddhism', for example), without remainders or exceptions. Rather, fieldworkers pay careful attention to moments and trends in ever-changing practices, experiences, representations and knowledges. By addressing defined questions (albeit while remaining open to emerging possibilities), they seek to produce outcomes that communicate matters of significance to others that will advance discussion. There is, in short, a continuous dynamic flow between the 'field', the study (or whatever venue serves for note taking, diary updating, sustained reflection, analysis and writing), and the various communities interested in the project.

Respect and drama

Especially by virtue of their close engagement with people (individuals or groups) and by willingly thinking hard about their own experiences among others, participant observers are likely to gain considerable **respect** for the people among whom they research. Many researchers come to treat such people not only as reliable informants but also as conversation partners and even as co-researchers in some respects. A recognition that religious people also reflect on their activities, experiences, ideas and interpretations (i.e. they are not merely credulous 'believers' or subservient followers of 'tradition') can create a basis for richer discussions between researchers and those among whom they research. Similarly, members of many religions are avid readers of academic publications. Indeed, many religious movements are significantly

affected (if not actually created) by people's engagements with academic research (e.g. Paganism, as discussed in Harvey 2007; and Candomblé, as discussed in Engler, forthcoming). In addition to respectful dialogue with adherents of religions about academic research questions, it is increasingly common for fieldworkers to act on the understanding that their hosts deserve some benefit from the presence of a researcher. For example, there might be an attempt to establish two-way processes of knowledge transfer. Some, but by no means all, field researchers are willing to become advocates or expert witnesses supporting those among whom they have researched. In addition to resulting in peer-reviewed journal articles or monographs, field research can involve or generate advantages to the researched community.

Fieldwork is the definitive method of diverse ethnological disciplines (e.g. anthropology, ethnobotany, ethnomusicology, performance studies and the study of religion) and is increasingly practiced elsewhere (e.g. in sociology and even theology). It is particularly good for engagement with specific issues in researching religion. Fieldwork may provide rich data about people's personal experiences within a religion, particular local expressions of a religion, or specific ritual practices, but ultimately researchers present their understandings of the lived reality, performance, implications and significance of religious engagements in ways that advance critical debates of a more than local nature. This is to concur *in part* with Victor Turner's methodological preference for 'chaps not maps' (Schechner n.d.), i.e. an insistence that research should pay attention to what people do rather than being entirely determined by theoretical constructions. Then, what we write about our research should 'bring home' a sense of the **drama** of what people actually do, the drama of doing research among them, and the drama of advancing knowledge and debate. This is not to forget that large proportions of what people do 'religiously' is far from dramatic (if this suggests something theatrical or spectacular), but reminds us to attend to what people do rather than to what people or texts assert.[1] Neither does attending to the 'drama' of 'what people do' ignore the fact that researchers enter 'the field' with scholarly questions and concerns, and that they seek to test theories in relation to what they observe and experience. At its best, then, fieldwork is not 'mere' description but argument arising from close familiarity with the living reality of religious activities. This is something that ought to enthuse researchers and make their projects (if not at every moment) engaging and sometimes exciting.

We have already paid some attention to the theoretical basis of fieldwork. It has been asserted that participant observation is founded on an understanding that some experience of the lived realities or performance of religion is a necessary prerequisite for theorizing about it. This idea privileges definitions of religion as action, what people do. It resonates with Malory Nye's encouragement to talk about 'religioning' (Nye 2004: 8), itself paralleling an anthropological incitement to replace 'culture' by 'culturing' (Rapport and Overing 2004: 97). Fieldwork research protocols and outcomes invite scholars to focus on the vernacular, lived-out, actual expressions, experiences and embodied knowledges of religious people. Leonard Primiano's (1995) insistence that religion is, in fact, always vernacular is instructive: even the Pope or the Dalai Lama perform lived religion rather than demonstrating some timeless pure or abstract form. They may be elite, but what they give expression to is their current and local form of religious life and practice, not a timeless fixity. In this and various other ways, the core theme of fieldwork is that religion is what people do, and is best researched by similarly active, participatory, embodied means. Experiential encounters with lived religion result in outcomes (books, conference papers, lectures, documentaries, etc.) which demonstrate that scholarly conventions about **care** and comparability are not compromised by scholarly presence and participation when these are performed reflexively and in dialogue with the research of others.

Care, comparison and not converting in fieldwork

Care is important in relation to various aspects of fieldwork. In addition to the (hopefully self-evident) requirement that observation should be carefully attentive to significant matters and moments, 'care' is, perhaps, a twin of 'respect' when considering how researchers might be expected to approach and treat those among whom they research. In a later section about ethics it will be noted that there are arguments for and against the use of covert methods. However, another sense of 'care' is important with respect to the expected processes and protocols of the academic community. It seems right that colleagues, students and others who hear or read the conclusions drawn from research should be able to trust that they are being offered a carefully considered and justified argument. Whether everyone agrees is not the point—academia is a community of continuous debate, not a collecting point for uncontentious (and ultimately uninteresting) facts. Field researchers should take care that they have engaged as fully as possible with what interests them, seeking clarity about possible contradictions to their interpretations, presenting sufficient information ('thick' or 'rich description') not only to illustrate a point but also to demonstrate the process by which its relevance and value was ascertained. Being careful also requires researchers to show how their work enriches understanding and furthers debate. In particular, care with previous research and publications is necessary—and may be demonstrated by the proper use of citations and the discussion of considered dissention from others' theories.

A specific form of care is especially important in relation to the acts and ideas of religious people. It fuses with consideration of the role of comparison. Indeed, the idea that religious studies fieldwork is about something identifiable as 'religion' is itself both necessarily comparative and inescapably contentious. Questions about whether something common in one group is prevalent elsewhere might inspire researchers' projects. The discovery that a practice or term learnt elsewhere has misdirected attention or interpretation in one's fieldwork may cause radical re-thinking of what one is experiencing. A widespread contemporary current in the study of religion entails challenging the dominance of Protestant Christian themes promiscuously applied where they are unwarranted. Malcolm Ruel's field research in West and East Africa provides the foundation both for considerable local and comparative analysis, and for explicit rejection of the universalizing of particular religious and scholarly themes. For example, he problematizes terms that are widely used in the study of religions such as 'belief' and 'ritual'. Ruel (2005: 262–63) concludes that 'shadows' cast by unwarranted transpositions of one religion's definitive themes (such as 'belief' in Christianity) on to other traditions both 'obscures what really it is that people see or think they see' (i.e. it damages the fieldwork description that scholars might offer) and it vitiates the 'clearer, steadier gaze on the world that we share' (i.e. it debases interpretative understandings). Ruel's challenge to the centrality of 'belief' in religions other than Christianity is made more complex by the subsequent proliferation of fieldwork enriching the recognition that Christians, too, do far more than 'believe'. More generally, decisions about what 'religion' is, if it is not (only) about belief and believing, are of great importance in framing and conducting fieldwork among religious people. What, after all, is it that religious studies scholars research that is distinct from what other ethnographers (for example) study? A working definition (one that can be improved or replaced with increased study) of what counts as 'religion' for the purpose of research among a particular group seems necessary to any successful project.

A final thought about care is that a specific feature of religions (although this is common in other cultural domains too) is that religious people often invite or expect 'outsiders' to join them, to be persuaded by their rhetoric or enthused by their practice, or to 'convert'. Most

religious activities are imbued with enticements to continue, commit, immerse oneself completely into the community or experience that they present and express. There are religious events intended for strangers, but they are only rarely neutral, and more commonly they are expected to have an impact on the observer, witness or as yet uninvolved. Scholarly responses to and participation in religious activities of all kinds is fraught with complex challenges. Even if researchers are not persuaded by or converted to a group, they may become so sympathetic that their published work reads more like advocacy than analysis. These difficult negotiations are regular themes in discussions of fieldwork experiences. Being clear about one's motivations, interests and purposes is likely to aid a researcher in maintaining a focus on the goal of contributing to academic debate, but all researchers can expect to be tested in some way as they engage with others.

Box 2.8.2 Key skills for fieldwork (to be continuously practiced and improved)

- Gaining rapport
- Practicing epoché
- Maintaining empathy
- Paying attention
- Being present

Conceiving the fieldwork researcher

This section surveys some of the ways in which fieldworkers have conceived of themselves and their role as field researchers. It includes common positionings such as 'methodological atheism' and 'methodological agnosticism' but also recognizes a wider range of possibilities. There are, for example, methodological ludists, guests, children, fools and neophytes. All of these develop the early reflections and practices of participant observers and the more recent emphasis on dialogical and reflexive researchers.

Scholars interested in religion have generally argued for the necessity of 'methodological agnosticism'. Peter Berger and Ninian Smart, for example, proposed an approach similar to that of phenomenologists to their subject matter. Scholars should simply not ask questions about truth (Smart 1973: 62), but should bracket out 'the ultimate status of religious definitions of reality' so that religious phenomena can be treated in a 'value-free' way (Berger 1969: 180). Although it is possible to find references to 'methodological atheism', what is intended seems little different to the 'agnostic' bracketing out of specific claims about the veracity of discourses about deities and other 'non-falsifiable postulated alternate realities' (Cox 2006: 236; Cox 2010: 21). It is legitimate, in this view, to study what people claim, but since it is impossible to scientifically test whether or not the referent of such claims are true, it cannot be academic to make the attempt.[2] Eileen Barker provides the example of an encounter with a woman who claimed to have joined a new religion 'because God directed her to the movement', and the woman's father who claimed that she 'had been possessed by evil spirits'. The sociologist, says Barker, 'cannot say which, if either, is the correct explanation—but merely reports' what these people believe (Barker 2010: 14). An interest in claims-making but not in the veracity of claims themselves is productive of accurate reportage about what people think,

believe or claim. In fact, Barker is far more than a 'methodological reporter'. She demonstrates that scholarly engagement with the many ways in which people act on the basis of their claims contributes importantly to theoretically informed debates about religion.

Explorations of ways in which researchers might relate to religious people 'in the field' offer an array of positions that enhance the foundational conception of fieldworkers as 'methodological agnostics'. It is possible to draw both on previous fieldworkers and on literary and cultural critics for some provocative possibilities. These include Claude Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, an adept in making available things serve new purposes; Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, an uninvolved but fascinated observer of city life; Gilles Deleuze's 'nomad', travelling between significant points but not dwelling in them; and Julia Kristeva's 'foreigner', who recognizes that we are all strangers to one another and thus could potentially honor both difference and solidarity. In various ways, all these conceptions (and others like 'tourist', people who casually and even accidently observe religion in passing) might provide useful ways of thinking about the placement of the researcher 'in between' those among whom they research and the wider scholarly community, bringing old theories to bear on new data, sometimes fascinated by what they observe but resistant to joining and getting fixed by others' ideas and commitments. Interesting as these are, more profit is gained from considering how fieldworkers specifically interested in religion have thought about their roles and relationships, and thus of themselves and their task.

Douglas Ezzy and André Droogers both infuse their approach to phenomenological fieldwork with insights drawn from performance studies. Discussing the pivotal role of the 'suspension of disbelief' in most considerations of 'methodological agnosticism', Ezzy elaborates on the expected experience of most theatre-goers. While watching a play, the audience must willingly conspire with the actors in the fiction that they are seeing reality. Ezzy expands:

> That is to say, the focus of a hermeneutically and phenomenologically orientated ethnographic methodology is the way people tell their stories, rather than the accuracy or otherwise of the account. Neither the realities of spiritual experience, nor the integral role of social and cultural processes that shape interpretation are ignored. Rather, the focus is on the relationship between experience and interpretation, between symbolically constructed realities and their consequences.
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> *(Ezzy 2004: 124)*

It is this methodological stance, that of the engaged audience, which underlies Ezzy's positive evaluation of research that recognizes the impact of religious interpretations on religious people. Using a range of examples, he demonstrates that religious explanations can be socially and culturally generative. Precisely by not treating religious explanations as an untouchable domain (or as only 'religious') he is able to engage with them as sociological data.

Going further, Droogers proposes a 'methodological ludism', leaving the audience and joining the performers on stage. This involves him among the players, in the midst of the action, engaged with the drama. His proposal is inspired by reflecting on traditional participant observation alongside theorization about play. He writes:

> In play, human beings are capable of dealing simultaneously with two or even more realities [. . .] By temporarily, but as completely as possible, sharing the concrete bodily experiences of the people being studied, the researcher gains in understanding the role of these experiences. Though requiring the seriousness of playing a role,

> methodological ludism is [. . .] methodological [. . .] and thereby independent of the researcher's personal conviction with regard to religion.
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> *(Droogers 2008: 455)*

In practice this is not a challenge to the way most fieldwork is conducted; after all, participant observation is founded on the necessity of participation. However, Droogers supports the effort to get involved (especially in the face of challenges related to the theme of 'belief', such as the alleged gulf between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and the potential incompatibility of a researcher's personal commitments and those of the researched community) by recognizing the strong similarities between researchers and actors performing roles. By 'sharing the concrete bodily experiences of the people being studied' researchers are likely to gain richer understanding of the embodied, sensual performances of vernacular and quotidian religion. Thus, he argues, 'we must acknowledge the role of the body as a research tool' (Droogers 2008: 456), and should recognize that bodily presence and participation, even among 'believers', will help scholars to 'understand what [particular] experiences mean to them' (ibid.: 461).

Despite his enthusiasm for close engagement with those he researches, Droogers agrees that 'the fieldworker may have some difficulty in identifying with the recruiting believer' (Droogers 2008: 461). Edith Turner, however, has expressed the hope that 'if it becomes respectable for anthropologists to admit to [actually seeing the 'spirit' forms that people suggest they can expect], it would become possible to speak from *within* a culture, rather than as an outsider' (Turner 1994: 86). It is certainly the case that most fieldworkers today do write about their experiences as an aid to conveying what certain events were like. Some do so firmly within the tradition of methodological agnosticism, noting what they observed and what they recorded other people doing. Other researchers have insisted that it is fully possible for a member of or participant in a religion to use the same skills as other scholars and to produce rich descriptive and theoretical discussions. Te Pakaka Tawhai, for example, has provided an introduction to 'Maori religion' (Tawhai 1988) that is locally and temporally bounded, and engages with ceremonies, speeches, knowledge transfers, everyday acts and his own experience. He talks of what people from his home town might understand by the word 'religion', and affirms that he is right to tell only a particular version of what is considered significant in his community, rejecting the fiction that there is one fixed thing that could be called 'Maori religion'. Another kind of partial insiderliness is the subject of Andrew Yip's reflections on 'researching British lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians and Muslims' (Yip 2005). A researcher's personal and/or social identity may provide common ground on which a dialogue can take place with members of religions to which they do not belong. Issues of belonging and difference, performing and identifying, are complex and all degrees along the 'insider/outsider' continuum can establish both bridges and barriers.

Somewhat more challengingly, Rane Willerslev's (2007) research among Yukaghir hunters in Siberia demonstrates that there are interesting parallels between the practice of fieldwork and that of hunting. In particular, researchers and hunters need to get as near as possible to their intended subject/object whilst avoiding becoming so involved with them that one not only forgets to hunt or research but becomes completely 'one of them'. (The possibility of becoming an animal is a generative theme, linked to mimesis, in Yukaghir hunters' myth-telling, hunting performance and in Willerslev's contribution to understanding this kind of animist religious culture.) Only by joining the hunt, being taught what hunting involves among animists, and adapting his behavior to local custom, could Willerslev have had experiences that enabled his research project to succeed. Learning by doing provided

insights that could be checked later (but not during the hunt if local cultural rules and roles were to be observed) in conversations and interviews. Bringing this experiential and mimetically learned understanding back to the academic world (rather than remaining a hunter in Siberia) means that Willerslev has been able to advance debate in a developing area of interdisciplinary research.

My own attempt to learn what is significant in Tawhai's multi-religious home town and among Maori living in Britain led me to conceive of fieldwork as 'methodological guesthood' (Harvey 2003, 2005). Maori have clear protocols, elaborated in a rich performative and material culture (identifiable as *powhiri*), for making strangers into guests. Field research training commonly distinguishes between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', but although this distinction might help scholars begin to think about their roles in relation to other kinds of participant, it is not so clear, convincing or productive in practice. Even before researchers arrive on the scene, religious (and other kinds of groups) are quite diverse in reality—with some holding firmly to 'core values' or teachings, others being quite flexible, and some feeling or expressing considerable doubt but enjoying the company (and so on). Researchers who are present even at the margins of an event affect what people do. When they ask questions they are likely to affect how and what people think about and express what they do or what it means. Scholars who 'belong' within the community that they research will, while performing research, attend to different actions, have different questions in mind, and experience events differently from when they are 'just' participating. There are, then, no 'insiders' who are not sometimes 'outside' to some degree in relation to those they observe. There are no 'outsiders' who are not sometimes 'inside' the event in which they participate. Like many dichotomies, this one is only heuristically useful, and then mostly before the researcher actually arrives 'in the field'. It is vital, however, for the field researcher to pay attention to whether the people who seem to tell them most (whether implicitly while being observed or explicitly as 'informants') are representative of the group of which they are members of some kind. However, within Maori protocols, being a 'guest' is not like being either an 'insider' or an 'outsider'. Guests cannot become locals, but locals cannot become hosts without guests. Culturally rich ceremonies would cease if there were no strangers seeking guesthood. Maori protocols recognize more than this. They make it possible for strangers to choose, once offered the possibility, between being enemies or becoming guests. To be an enemy might be to insist that locals are definitively wrong in what they do, or in what they understand about what they do, and that only an outside observer can authoritatively define what matters. Once a stranger has become a guest, they certainly have responsibilities but they are not expected to agree with everything their hosts might say. Indeed, Maori guest-making occasions are often followed by intense discussions and negotiations that seek mutual understanding and collaborative action but acknowledge that recognizing difference is a possible outcome. Several things become clear in using all this to think about research positions: guest-researchers can offer themselves as potential guests but it is the host's right to offer or decline access, guest-researchers do not at first know what their potential hosts know (scholars are not experts about other people, only about their own mysteries and questions), guest-researchers make a difference to locals (aka 'natives') by their presence, guest-researchers have unique (non-'native') experiences of a culture or performance in which they are guests, and fuller understanding of the relevance of local data may best arise in dialogue and interaction.

In discussing ideas about 'methodological guesthood' (often embedded in more intimate guesthood relationships) I have been offered various other religion-specific, culture-specific or rite-specific parallel or complementary perspectives. These deserve consideration because few religious groups offer anything as clear-cut as Maori guest-making protocols. Finding a

way into relationship with a community, and a way of becoming familiar and then knowledgeable about people, requires some initial positioning of oneself as a researcher. In some contexts, children are allowed to ask questions and make mistakes until they are shown how they should act. They may be given an appropriate, basic level of instruction on which to build further knowledge. In other contexts, slow or dramatic processes of initiation are required to inculcate the correct knowledge and behavior in neophytes. Researchers might, then, conceive of themselves as children or neophytes. These are among the productive possibilities that arise from the acknowledgement that research really is about seeking understanding that scholars do not yet have about matters that are commonplace or familiar to others.

Whether the hosts, teachers, responsible adults or initiators of such researchers are willing to play such roles is another question. It is always possible that people might reject researchers (whether by explicitly refusing access or by more subtly making it impossible to participate). Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980) discovered that those from whom she sought information about witchcraft in the French Bocage were willing to mislead her, but also that her own fairly traditional 'observer' positioning was a barrier to understanding. She writes:

> For anyone who wants to understand the meaning of this discourse, there is no other solution but to practise it oneself, to become one's own informant, to penetrate one's own amnesia, and to try and make explicit what one finds unstateable in oneself.
>
> *(Favret-Saada 1980: 22)*

Her re-conception and performance of herself as a self-informant is generative of significant insights about the popular practices, suspicions and webs of accusation that make up this form of witchcraft. Totally immersing herself in this deeply subjective and reflexive culture arguably allowed Favret-Saada to understand 'what it felt like', and then communicate about it to other scholars, in ways that would be hard by any means other than what can be called 'autoethnography' (Ellis 2003; Wallis 2004). However, other researchers in similar situations might feel that there is 'another solution', namely to go elsewhere or revise their intended project into something that can be achieved with the cooperation of others.

These various ideas about how researchers conceive of themselves and their role in relation to the people among whom they research all, in various ways, develop out of an agreement that fieldwork and participant observation are proper ways to conduct research. As fieldwork practice has evolved, the question of how researchers understand and present themselves and the results of their work has become central. Recognition of the inadequacy (conceptually and practically) of the 'insider/outsider' dichotomy has led to a range of more participative, reflexive and dialogical positions and performances. Most of the above examples (engaged audience, actor, hunter, guest, child and so on) are particular versions of these developments. They all conceive of the researcher as someone who needs more than observer status but has to be careful about full participation. They all remain within the parameters indicated by the collocation 'participant observation', but indicate that more precision is possible. Usually this precision arises while in the field, trying to observe while participating and vice versa, testing initial conceptions and ideas. To that degree, what has been set out so far has been a series of ideas that a trainee researcher might use to develop their intention or manifesto. However, given that these ideas come from experienced researchers, it must be clear that scholars come to see themselves differently once they get out into the field and get involved with religious people. The following sections, therefore, pick up the thread of the question, how is this done in practice?

Deciding who or where to research

It seems likely that most prospective researchers already have ideas about who or where to research. They are interested in particular religions, sub-groups of religious people, communities in particular places, ritual complexes performed by specific groups, themes that cut across diverse religions or communities, or emerging trends or debates that might be examined in relation to a group or event. Sometimes a chance conversation or an apparent gap in an otherwise respected teacher's knowledge suggests a topic that might deserve investigation. My own first attempts at field research began when a new course about 'contemporary religion' was being developed at the university where I was completing my PhD about semantic fields in ancient Jewish texts. Having been brought up near Stonehenge I had been to the festival held there around the summer solstice and I had noticed, but not been particularly interested in, some Druids. Nonetheless, I volunteered to offer a session about contemporary Druidry and was taken seriously. So I set off to find out where these people were, what they did, what they intended by what they did, and what possible interest this might have for students of religion. By asking people who seemed likely to know Druids (mostly hippies and other 'alternative' people who were far from rare in the English West Country) I encountered a few groups. I introduced myself and my desire to learn about them. They were, of course, entertained by my somewhat naïve approach, some having studied degrees that led them to expect more focused questions than 'could you tell me all about yourselves?' and 'can I observe a ceremony?'

I have learnt that having a question in mind is helpful both because it provides a guide or goal for research and because it allows me to explain why I would like people to entertain my presence and interest. I do not have to ask the question of everyone involved, but I do need to be able to say what it is that motivates me. Telling them what explains my presence generally contributes significantly to conversations about why others are there too.

My later fieldwork has, then, involved attempts to engage with specific issues. There are few, if any, unresearched religious groups in the world now (or, if there are any, they are sub-groups of quite similar groups elsewhere). It is unlikely that scholars of religion will share the experience of some early anthropologists and missionaries who were the first of their kind of human to meet particular groups. More commonly, researchers interested in religion select communities to research among because it seems likely that such a group will provide the best context in which to seek understanding, or to improve knowledge, understanding or debate. Thus, a researcher seeking to define a project might select a current critical debate and ponder which group or event might most usefully be engaged with for the purpose of making an advanced contribution. For example, having heard people assert that 'Paganism is the indigenous religion of Britain' I wondered what 'religion' might be like among 'indigenous people' of the kind to which this phrase normally refers, e.g. Native Americans. Opportunities arose for me to visit a First Nation reserve in Canada for a conference about 'healing', and then a Native American reservation in the USA where some friends were visiting other friends. These brief introductions provided me with starting points for longer research projects. Somewhat serendipitous encounters and connections often lead researchers to meet with just the right people among whom the question that most interests them can be most usefully explored.

In brief, it is likely that prior interests about particular religions or a sense of intrigue about an academic issue encountered in studying religion will provide the foundation for further research. Interest and enthusiasm should not be set aside or ignored. They do not have to lead to partisanship but can be built into the foundation of the process of careful paying attention that is fieldwork in the study of religions.

Learning in the field

In introducing my suggestion that researchers might conceive of themselves as 'guests' among knowledgeable and authoritative 'hosts' I noted that it is up to others to determine whether we might be allowed access. My understanding of these possibilities, and the observations of other scholars noted above, arose while trying to act as advised by predecessors who taught or wrote about fieldwork. Many of our refinements of fieldwork positions and performance are due to the fact that what actually happens in the field is not always what is expected. As participant observation has evolved as a method and a stance with regard to others, and especially as dialogical and reflexive approaches have developed, researchers have gained confidence both in the field and in communicating what it is actually like to do research. For example, Ron Geaves describes the various senses of awe, displacement and personal change that he felt during a Naqshbandi Sufi *dhikr* in England. Realizing the number of times that similar events have occurred across the Muslim world, often involving 'some of the greatest exponents of mysticism the world has known', was awe inspiring. On then realizing that what he was participating in was happening in a British city among people who he believed familiar to him from more everyday interactions (e.g. shopping) he felt displaced and changed: he would 'never perceive [these people] through the same lens; for he had been permitted an insight into a dimension of their lives he had not formerly been aware of' (Chryssides and Geaves 2007: 240). Hard as it is to prepare for awe and displacement when participating in dramatic events or in other people's lives, researchers will be faced with questions about how to represent such experiences in what they say or write later.

If some do not encounter life-changing experiences among religionists, or if they do manage to resist their impact, they are still likely to be changed. This is not at all to suggest that scholars of religion will (let alone must) become religious. Rather it is to acknowledge that neophyte researchers will become researchers by doing research. Karen Sykes observes that an 'anthropologist getting started at fieldwork, like a kula trader getting started in ceremonial exchange, sets a chain of other transactions into play' (Sykes 2005: 214). In participant observation among one group of people or at one event, the fieldworker becomes different. It is hoped that they become more skilled. Similarly, just as the hunters among whom he researched had to 'steer a complicated course between the ability to transcend difference and the necessity of maintaining identity' as they attempted to be, to some degree, 'both human and the animals they imitate' (University of California Press 2007), so Willerslev's research required him to be both a researcher and a hunter. What may begin with mimicry becomes a visceral, deeply affecting experience of what it means to do what other people do. There is no escaping reflexivity when the task of the researcher resonates with the tasks performed by religious people when doing religion: finding out how to behave, seeking understanding, or trying to convey experience and understanding to others.

It is impossible to say what will happen to a researcher performing fieldwork. Perhaps the best possible advice is to try it while being open to possibilities and careful to allow for the unexpected. Even everyday religious activities can include surprise, and everyday research activities can include serendipitous encounters. Concentration and effort is also integral to both religious and research practice. It is hard enough, so people inform researchers, to learn to meditate, pray, sacrifice, hunt, live appropriately and so on. Observing others doing these things has its challenges, especially for researchers who seek to gain understanding by participation. On the one side there are questions of privacy and belonging, on the other there are questions about empathy, completeness and 'getting it right'.

Many religious events or activities are private or intensely personal. Being trusted enough to be shown what they involve or told what impact they have had on people is never

automatic. Honesty about being there as a researcher and humility about one's ignorance might be necessary first steps towards being trustworthy. Gaining knowledge of what it is like to be taught is probably straightforward for most researchers, especially those who do not already believe themselves to be the experts or to know the whole truth already. Understanding more fully than merely recording what people say requires both experience and finding ways to check with (other) practitioners. Since reflexivity is not only about knowing how things seem to oneself, but is intended to facilitate understanding of other people, it usually involves a mixture of participatory involvement and testing with reference to other people's experiences. Participant observation, therefore, does not only mean doing what other people do and then wondering what they think they are doing. It involves dialogue with others. This might entail more-or-less intense conversations (including chatting while washing up) or more-or-less formal interviews. Knowing what is appropriate can be a challenge, especially to those who research where questions are not welcome or normal. There is always the possibility that the very fact that researchers might have to learn in different ways from other participants entails them learning different things. That is, they may not grasp exactly what it is like for non-researchers to learn about their religion. This too can be discussed with more 'insiderly' people. Indeed, the process of careful checking is another continuous exercise required of researchers as they dialogue with religionists.

Much of this can be summed up in the term 'rapport', which can be easier to define that to enact sometimes. It involves establishing and maintaining friendly relationships with people, involving trust, shared concerns and/or understandings, and some level of mutual commitment to the success of a project. It is not necessarily based on researchers agreeing with, committing to, or promoting other people's ideas and practices. It is not the same as conversion. Rather, it can involve being openly interested or even enthusiastic about what motivates and excites other people. It might be demonstrated by a willingness to turn up regularly, to pay attention, to get involved where this is possible, to be genuinely interested in others, and to talk honestly but respectfully about one's own interests. Rapport is a two-way relationship, and may involve 'informants' being willing to trust researchers enough to answer questions and to provide access to and company at events. Some people manage to make friends and establish trust easily. Similarly, some groups seem more ready to be trusting of researchers than others. Most researchers, however, find that there are times when they have to work hard at building and maintaining rapport.

Rapport may well be a result of the studied practice of **empathy**, defined by Daniel Capper as 'vicarious introspection', 'the capacity to think or feel oneself into the inner life of another person' and 'evenly hovering attention' (Capper 2003: 237–38, citing Heinz Kohut's psychology-based argument). He illustrates this with the realization that dawned on him while attempting to conduct fieldwork among American Buddhists that he was actually distancing himself from people in various ways. As Cox writes, empathy is imprecise, it is 'more like an attitude than an empirically measurable method', and 'subject to misinterpretation', so should not be treated too casually (Cox 2010: 54). Researchers have to work hard to appreciate what is ordinary and taken for granted as well as what is experienced as spectacular and inspiring by those they observe. The balancing act between observing to answer academic questions and trying to know what regular participants know is a challenge. Dialogue with others may aid researchers in checking that they really are 'getting it', appreciating what it is that others are up to. Capper's article is invaluable here. He shows that by getting more involved in tasks in the community, placing himself among others learning what was expected, and sometimes offering to do things that he was already skilled at doing, he found himself not only involved but also advancing his research. As he got 'caught' in the discourse

and community, his research advanced greatly. He began to understand what others did because he was learning in the same ways as they did. He was not alone in harboring doubts and unease, so mutual sharing enriched his understanding of what it was like for others to try to become Buddhists. He found that they, too, were experimenting with different ways to understand and experience what seemed to be expected of them. Many other researchers have noted that, in addition to putting oneself in the position of other learners (children, guests or neophytes), casual conversations in kitchens and while occupied with 'mundane' work provide richer insight into a religion than any formal lecture. However, this must be attempted honestly. Raising doubts about other people's views, practice or leaders is not a good methodological gambit unless a high degree of rapport has already been established. Gaining rapport, then, is not just about entering the field, it too requires continuous negotiation. A sense of humor and a willingness to be sociable can be as helpful as trying not to take offence too easily.

Another way to think about the process of gaining entry, trust, familiarity, and eventually knowledge and understanding of a religious group is provided by thinking about Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, taken for granted everyday or casual behaviors or demeanor, or what people expect or themselves attempt to abide by as expressed in the ways they move and act. Gustavo A. Ludueña's (2005) discussion of research among Latin American Catholic monks provides an extreme example of fieldwork among people who are hard to approach, let alone research among. Having selected a closed, silent, contemplative and ascetic order of monks as an interesting field of enquiry, Ludueña was confronted by the impossibility of actually participating in their lives. He could not even get beyond the community's guest house. However, in that place, where others visited for 'retreats', he could learn to abide by the regimes and routines of the community, albeit in a constrained and limited manner. By carrying out the silence, reading, praying and listening that is required, he gained some purchase on the permanent lifeways or *habitus* of the community. His reflections on learning the community's 'technologies of the self' (citing Foucault and those influenced by him), especially the self-surveillance implicated in the active practice of silence, permitted the emergence of an understanding of what others were experiencing. He does not claim to present to others what it is like to be a Benedictine monk, nor does he claim to have become as ascetic as them. He does, however, propose that reflection on the technologies of the self that apply inside monasteries resonate with the different kind of careful self-observation necessary if researchers are going to do more than obsess about their own preconceptions. This leads him to conclude that fieldwork is a process of 'adaptation-participation' in which researchers adjust their behavior, demeanor and practice to those of the community that they seek to understand by degrees of constrained (ascetic or adapted) participation.

Every manual on ethnology and phenomenology includes advice on the necessity and performance of **epoché**, 'the bracketing out or suspending of a researcher's previous ideas, thoughts or beliefs about the truth, value or meaning of the religion [culture, event, or community] under study' (Cox 2010: 49). That it is genuinely possible to set aside one's ideas and expectations seems unlikely, but being aware of presuppositions and one's own 'ideas, thoughts and beliefs', and being vigilant against their untested influence on one's analysis of fieldwork, is crucial. This is what the metaphor 'bracketing' intends: not rejecting or ignoring anything but finding ways to be clear and careful about what is known and what is not known. After all, some 'previous ideas' are required: research projects must begin with ideas about what information is to be sought, what debates are relevant to the selected 'field' and what potential 'meanings' are to be tested. Nonetheless, epoché, like building rapport, is a continuous fieldwork practice that checks. Its success is indicated by the ability to

demonstrate the value of existing theories (from whatever source) in relation to the phenomena that present themselves.

Researchers who achieve rapport (perhaps by adjusting their habitus to that of their hosts), and practice epoché and empathy, are also likely to engage in and reflect on dialogues between their own and other people's participative acts. Put bluntly, they are likely to be interested in what other participants in religious activities understand about what happens. They are likely to discuss events and interpretations with others. Prior expectations and theories (perhaps suggested by the writings of other scholars) will have been tested by conversations and/or interviews in which the researcher says 'I think this is what happened' and 'this is how it seemed to me', and their subjects, informants, discussants or 'interpreters' (as Capper 2003 prefers to say) confirm or challenge interpretations. Then fieldworkers can say that by presence, participation and discussion they know something of what others do and understand. They may never be certain that everyone, even in a small group, has the same experiences or interpretations but they have made efforts to observe, participate, reflect on and discuss as much as is possible.

Limits

There are, nonetheless, limits to a researcher's participation in fieldwork. Beyond the difficult questions of research among potentially violent, hostile or 'deviant' groups, and the limits placed on possible research by a scholar's gender or willingness to adapt to local expectations, or by any habitual inability to achieve rapport with others, there are a few other matters that are worth noting.

A significant set of limits to the practice and value of fieldwork exist precisely because researchers do not know the field, and those in the field do. Knowing whether it is possible to ask questions is one thing. Knowing whether it is *necessary* to ask is far more difficult. While researching among the Kalahari !Kung, Richard Lee discovered that he remained ignorant and somewhat socially excluded precisely because he had not asked what was going on. He records the answer to his impassioned enquiry about why nobody had told him that he had been mocked as a way of indicating his need to act differently: ' "Because you never asked me," said Tomazo, echoing the refrain that has come to haunt every field ethnographer' (Lee 1969: 17). However, it is equally likely that Tomazo and the !Kung took it for granted that anyone but a fool or a young child would know what was happening and what was expected. Conversely, there are contexts in which the asking of questions is a certain way to close down a research project. However, ethnographies are replete with warnings about asking too many questions or, indeed, any questions at all. This can be because people become irritated by continuous interrogation or because they prefer to 'do' religion than to 'explain it'. More commonly, perhaps, people perceive researchers as asking question after question in an effort to 'explain away' or demolish practitioners' experiences or knowledges. There are also examples of religious complexes (such as Candomblé) or specific rites in which the asking of questions is deemed inappropriate. People are expected to learn by imitation and practice, or to be initiated into secrets under the authoritative direction of those who cannot be questioned. Therefore, knowing whether questions are permissible and/or necessary can set limits both to the practice and the value of research. Initial phases of research in which scholars orientate and adapt themselves to local expectations are likely to resolve these issues. However, sometimes mistakes and being corrected can be the only way to learn. Lee, for example, discovered a lot more about !Kung teaching and learning styles than if he had not been the subject of their somewhat humiliating modes of admonishment. Not only did he learn a range

of hitherto unexpected rules, but he discovered the sense of social interactions he had only partially understood previously. Experiential knowledge is sometimes absolutely vital.

The asking of questions and the act of participant observation can, like all acts of observation, cause changes in that which researchers observe. Some religious people are intensely reflexive and deeply interested in understanding the meaning of what they do, but many people's first encounter with an inquisitive researcher is their first realization that anyone might worry about the 'meaning' of taken-for-granted or core activities. If *doing* a particular thing, especially if the action is one performed every day since childhood, is what it means to be counted within a group there may have been no previous reason to question it. In some respects it is true that the scholarly task (to understand religion) is quite distinct from the religious task (to do religion), even if such a claim is at the heart of Protestant Christian polemics against Catholicism, and thus lies at one fecund root of modernity. It is likely that questioning religious actions will evince more than one, often contradictory answer. It is equally likely that the 'informant' will be speaking about something that has just changed its feel, resonance, impact or even meaning for them. Negotiating this problematic area might require the researcher to dramatically curtail the asking of questions and to take considerable care in further participant observation. More likely, it could encourage the researcher to find more casual and conversational ways of eliciting knowledge of what people understand by their actions.

Similarly, questions addressed to 'ordinary' religious people are frequently answered by humble claims that 'I am not a good example, I can recommend a book or a teacher who knows more or is a better model than I'. For researchers who want to understand lived religion, this can be frustrating. Participation and reflection on experiences while acting among religious people are good means of gaining an appreciation of what is ordinary among them. However, especially given the pervasive influence of modernity globally, it is more than likely that religious people will offer researchers copious explanations of what is significant among them. That is, religious people are rarely naïve, and their religions are rarely 'pure' and untainted by experiment, doubt, reflection, questioning and debate. (This is not to suggest that they should be, but rather to parody that expectation.) Again, Paganism and Candomblé provide excellent examples of religions created and developed in more-or-less continuous dialogue with academic thought. The term 'reactivity' is one term used to label such processes. Assessments vary, but it seems proper to state that researchers should not actively set out to cause change but neither should they shy away from the inevitable fact that their presence, observation and questions will cause reactions. The thing to notice is that reactivity is not only caused by academic engagement, but religions and people are continuously adjusting and developing in reaction to their multifaceted contexts and wider relationships.

The theory of fieldwork is also haunted by the question of solipsism, the idea that people can only be certain of their own thoughts. This extreme expression of individualism can make the researcher doubt that they can possibly understand those among whom they research. Insider experience may be thought to be inaccessible or utterly personal. There are obvious links with the claims of some religious people that the core of religion is transcendent and ineffable. Equally, there are links with the claim that 'experience' is always already interpreted and never 'immediate', uninterpreted or integrated into existing patterns. If taken to extremes, such thoughts might limit the fieldworker to reporting on and analyzing only what they saw or felt, making no claims about others. They might, however, at least engage with what informants or local translators of their own experience claim to have done, felt or thought. Interviewed by Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (2010), the folklorist Dorothy Noyes argued that:

> Nothing can be communicated perfectly. Even the verbatim quotation of a verbal utterance loses tone, timbre, context. Of course it's much harder to put the taste of wine or the exhaustion of having danced all night into language: not only are you reducing the original experience, as any representation must, but you have to translate it into a completely different code. So we have to start by recognizing the inadequacy of language to reproduce experience. But the basic semiotic processes of indexicality and metaphor can still get us somewhere. We can point to the quality of experience by showing all of its observable concomitants: who was there, what the weather was like, what we drank, what music was playing. I can't give you the experience, but I can show you how I got there. And insofar as you have had comparable experiences you can get the general idea. There is also metaphor, using a familiar domain to represent an unfamiliar one: a common strategy for describing religious experience. Metaphor too relies on bodily experiences common to us as a species: being warmed by the sun or thrown into cold water, being suckled or beaten.
>
> *(Koskinen-Koivisto 2010: 4)*

The probable ubiquity of metaphor in religions, and the commonality of bodily experience might provide confidence that researchers can, in fact, convey something of the experience of 'what it was like' to be among people when they did certain things. The foundational Cartesian doubt of bodily, sensate experience is unlikely to be set aside on this basis. However, perhaps skepticism and solipsism are sufficiently weakened by the setting aside of the possibility of absolute objectivity (of the kind previously attributed, intriguingly, to transcendent deities and practitioners of 'pure science') that field researchers may be encouraged to keep trying to gain participative or performative experience and to communicate thick description and phenomena-true analysis.[3]

Ethics in fieldwork

Most universities and national associations or societies devoted to the study of religion provide guidance on research ethics. Much of what concerns them has been considered in our previous discussion of various issues about establishing good relationships with the people among whom we conduct research. 'Respect' might be as good a term as any: it does not require agreement with everything people do, say or think, but it does require willingness to consider others' choices, reasons and explanations. It encourages polite explication of where one differs from 'informants' or 'insiders'. Much of this is true of any kind of research. However, there are a few issues that are specific to fieldwork research that deserve some attention.

Mathew Guest's (2002) reflections on the processes and stages of his fieldwork among different kinds of Christians usefully illustrates what university and other ethics committees encourage, i.e. 'overt' research. Not all researchers discuss the question of overt versus covert research because most assume that open identification of oneself as a researcher is the correct stance to adopt in relation to others. Guest presents the preference for overt research as having both ethical and pragmatic foundations. Ethically, he considered it proper to be honest about being there to do research, being respectful of (other) participants, giving them an opportunity to treat him differently from other participants or visitors. Pragmatically, he needed to be trusted so that people would be willing to engage in conversation and interviews. In these conversations, he notes, he responded honestly to questions about his own beliefs and affiliations, and found that this 'allowed me to gauge responses to outsiders generally' (Guest 2002: 42). Conversations about his own status, beliefs and identity contributed significantly to his

understanding of the dynamics of the groups of interest. In particular, they capture the distinctive ways in which each group understands the boundaries of their communities, and how these might be variously permeated, crossed and/or policed.

Conversely, some researchers have sought to justify covert observation. There are 'soft' cases as, for example, where unobtrusive observations from the margins of a fairly public ceremony may provide rich data on what anyone would notice. This is unlikely to harm participants, and the mere attempt to gain consent from everyone would usually be impossible but anyway could seriously affect the event and, thus, the conclusions drawn from observation. It seems likely that most fieldwork involves at least some occasions of this nature. More dramatically 'hard' cases of covert research occur too. Matthew Lauder, for example, argues that that 'is a useful and necessary tool in the examination of deviant communities', citing the example of research among 'a neo-National Socialist organisation that adheres to a racial-religious worldview' (Lauder 2003: 185). Access to such groups might be difficult, but whether deceit is appropriate (let alone necessary) is likely to be variously assessed. New researchers are best advised to seek advice from their supervisors, university or subject association ethics committees before embarking on such projects. These are likely to be familiar with the difficulties, but may, in any case, suggest that potentially dangerous groups are not the right place to begin learning or developing the skills of a fieldwork researcher. There are considerable benefits in starting a research career among people one feels some positive interest in, not least of which is the increased possibility of rapport.

Another fieldwork-specific issue arises from the practice of initiation among many religious groups. In an article in which he argues for fuller 'sharing' between researchers and the researched, Douglas Ezzy (2004) cites Edith Turner's vision of ethnography as 'an endeavor shared by natives and anthropologists' (Turner 1994: 87). He illustrates his argument by referring to his edited book about Australian witchcraft (Ezzy 2003) for which he invited selected witches to write chapters. More of his argument engages a contrast between published fieldwork among British magicians by Tanya Luhrmann (1989) and Susan Greenwood (2000). Both sought and gained initiation into groups whose meetings and rituals are not open to casual observers. Neither did so covertly. Everyone involved knew they were researchers and could not be said to be harmed by being observed without their knowledge and at least tacit consent. By acting just as other people do on seeking membership of esoteric and other private or even secretive religious organizations, Luhrmann and Greenwood learnt what happens and what it feels like more fully than would be possible by other means. The contrast between their research is in their publications, with Luhrmann insisting that she never really believed in magic's efficacy, and Greenwood insisting that full religious participation can enhance rather than delegitimize a researcher's work. At the very least, as Ezzy and other scholars have responded to Luhrmann's work, there are suspicions that other participants were in fact deceived about Luhrmann's intentions and participation. Among esotericists these are central concerns, and the publication of her skepticism made it difficult for other researchers to gain access to similar groups. Conversely, Ezzy (2004: 116–24) insists that Greenwood's apparently 'insiderly' claim (that 'magical identities are structured through a psycho-spiritual interaction with the otherworld', i.e. that magicians rightly interpret their experiences) in fact generates discussion that delivers significant sociological (rather than 'religious') understanding.

Recording data

Fieldwork's most memorable moments are likely to take place in the drama of performance or the intimacy of a conversation in which understanding dawns. It is not always easy or

appropriate to record events or take notes of conversations as they happen, but most people seem pleased if asked, 'do you mind if I write that down? It conveys the thing so well and I'm keen not to forget your words'. Recording the exact words used by someone is absolutely necessary if there is any intention of quoting them. Many field researchers attempt to keep a diary-style record of events and impressions, updated as frequently as possible in unobtrusive ways. These are likely to aid in the writing of rich and evocative 'thick description' that conveys the sense of what it was like to be there (even in dull, undramatic moments). Remembering that fieldwork is about analyzing experiences, it is probably of the essence that any such recorded data is reflected upon rather than treated as a 'pure', unmediated record of what happened. Notes about the relevance of what is observed are invaluable accompaniments to notes about what happened.

In considering what goes into a diary it may be helpful to consider Clifford Geertz's powerful argument in favor of 'thick description' (a phrase he credits to Gilbert Ryle) as a means of conveying both what people do and what is significant for scholars about what people do. Setting out a word-picture of what people do, describing the context of significant actions, and drawing attention to important moments and actors is not only an initial stage in presenting research to others, those who were not present when the researcher saw, heard, experienced or recorded matters. This is signaled by the subtitle of the opening chapter of his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973): 'Thick description: towards an interpretive theory of culture'. Thick description of the particular or local is a selective process in which the researcher provides rich data about lived realities in relation to which theories and debates can be tested and advanced or negated. Thus, the information in Geertz's writings about what people do and what they have told him is not there to provide colorful illustrations for detailed analytical or theoretical contributions to debates. It is already interpreted data being opened up to further consideration. Thick description is more than 'mere subjective description' or 'naïve reportage' because it is attentive to more than one person's perspective, interpretation or questions. Rather, the provision of 'thick' or 'rich' description, informed by theory and aware of debate, will contribute significantly to the continuous project of debate that Geertz says is characteristic of academia: 'The precision with which we vex each other', he says, 'along with plaguing subtle people with obtuse questions, is what being an ethnographer is like' (Geertz 1973: 29, 30). Providing other people with a sense of what is interesting, important and provocative for critical discussion begins with what is written in diaries. As with every other aspect of research, practice with diary entry writing will lead to increased fluency and the likelihood of providing oneself with material that can easily become 'thick description'.

Video and audio technologies for the immediate recording of events as they occur are now commonplace and can be immensely useful, especially in relation to religious events or rituals.[4] Viewed after the event, they can reveal details missed in the drama of the moment or while paying attention to one practitioner rather than another. Replaying episodes or seemingly significant moments can enrich understanding of their importance (whether by revealing their centrality or their marginality). Sometimes it is helpful to play recordings to other participants and ask them to say what is significant. However, if note-taking during ceremonies can be disruptive, recording equipment requires careful preparation. Notoriously, people act differently when confronted with cameras or microphones. In some contexts they are simply not allowed, perhaps on the grounds that everyone should be fully involved rather than fussing about with machinery or anticipating later viewing, or because some events are deemed too sacred or personal to permit recording. Respect for the wishes, habits or culture of informants is likely to lead to resolutions that improve the process of research. Many

researchers have found that people are only disturbed by the presence of notepads, cameras or other recording devices for a short while, especially since religious events often include early efforts to concentrate on 'more important matters' and set aside all distractions. Making it possible for this to happen, and offering to share copies of (perhaps edited) recordings can be invaluable.

Although some research manuals insist on the transcription of every word of an interview and every detail of an event, few researchers have sufficient time to do so. It is, however, not only sufficient but invaluable to annotate a synopsis of all recordings (noting the time or point in the recording at which events or transitions occurred, or at which themes were raised). These will highlight the parts (which may be brief) in which the main focus of a research project is touched upon. They ought also to summarize other events or discussions because awareness may later dawn that 'this too is relevant' and also because it might contribute to a future project with different purposes.

The posthumous and controversial publication of Malinowski's private fieldwork diary (Malinowski and Firth 1989) reveals much about the process by which his ideas about fieldwork evolved. However, their inclusion of derogatory remarks casts doubt on whether he had sufficient respect for his hosts to have tested his personal impressions by engaging in dialogue with them. This is not (simply) a warning to take care about what to write in such diaries, rather it should serve as an encouragement to work harder at rapport, epoché, respectful attention and dialogue. It is, however, also noteworthy that any recordings, notes, diaries and publications that include information about other people must now meet the requirements of national and/or international data protection legislation. Perhaps this ought to be an automatic part of showing respect to those from whom we benefit greatly as researchers. Nonetheless, it is also helpful to realize that the framing of such legislation has involved considerable debate about what is useful and appropriate. In short, notes, diaries and other material that results from research among human subjects may be requested by those concerned, and must be protected from others who might misappropriate data.

More positively, the writing of notes as soon as one can, re-working them as a research diary (including at least initial interpretation and further questions to be considered), and generally writing as much as possible about everything, is valuable as a stimulation to a researcher's own reflexive and analytical tasks. Alongside recording the exact words that informants speak, noting the key stages in observed events and emphasizing significant thoughts about the research, the development of writing skills will also result in at least occasional realizations about what really was important. Sometimes you have to try to communicate something in order to understand it fully. Additionally, the fuller the notes and records are, the more likely you are to notice things that you did not expect or anticipate. If a research project really justifies the name 'research' it cannot merely confirm existing knowledge—and certainly it must do more than this if it is to result in doctoral qualifications or postdoctoral publications that advance research.

Disseminating fieldwork results

Field research tends to result in distinctive kinds of writing. It is perhaps worth repeating a point made earlier: that fieldwork involves ways of recording data that make processes of selectivity, refinement or focusing central. It is equally true that the best examples of publications arising from fieldwork make the researcher's presence, participation, experiences and reflexive processes visible. Being explicit about all these key performances by the researcher is likely to enrich the presentation of results. However, research is not all about the researcher

any more than it is only about the particular and local (as Geertz demonstrated in his 'thick description'). None of this is to say that all fieldwork-based publications will present the author's personal experiences or scholarly analysis in the same way. Some will only note 'presence' in acknowledging debts to those among whom the researcher spent time, or in short methodological introductions. Others will attempt to represent particularly important encounters or experiences in more extensive discussions. Following the 'writing culture' debate alluded to earlier, it is increasingly commonplace for academics to provide a richer sense of presence in their publications—after all, a researcher's participation and reflections are central to what their work actually discusses. The key point that will be conveyed in fieldwork outputs is that researchers have aimed to get involved and understand as closely as possible what they have witnessed and engaged with.

It is worth noting, too, that researchers do not only disseminate their work in the form of publications aimed at other academics. Fieldwork often builds close relationships between scholars and religious people or groups. Sometimes this results in invitations or requests to the researcher to aid the community in some way. Some are happy to serve as expert witnesses in court cases (e.g. where religious affiliation plays a role in conflicts involving divorce, child custody or inheritance). Even the fact that a book or article exists about a particular religion or local group can be cited in support or opposition of issues affecting people. Organizations such as the British Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM), and the Swedish Association for Research and Information about New Religions (FINYAR) negotiate the difficult territory between enabling 'peaceful co-existence among the diversity of religions' and challenging 'misrepresentations [that] jeopardize the human rights' of religious people (Barker 2010: 21). Others will certainly consider any such hint of advocacy to be illegitimate, perhaps preferring that religious and other social groups sought out their own difficulties without academic intervention. As during the fieldwork phase of research, so afterwards when there is data to disseminate, the question of whether 'objectivity' requires distance or some degree of participation is fraught.

Conclusion: before you go

All research methods must be fit for their purpose. Fieldwork is particularly good for getting at what lived religion is like. It is well suited to research about ritual and everyday performance. For example, a full understanding of the Roman Catholic mass requires observation, at least, of the preparation and the aftermath of the central ritual. Assertions about power, hierarchy and gender might be challenged or confirmed (or partially both of these) when the full range of participants is noted, from cleaners and cooks to ritualists and counselors. Questions about the use rather than the origins of texts, especially as read, heard, venerated, material objects, can be answered by participant observation. Finding out what 'ordinary' people (who are often extraordinary) do and think, whether or not this is what their leaders or texts decree, is well within the domain of field research.

Limits may be established both by researchers and communities. Perhaps it is the job of scholars to minimize the reasons why they could be excluded. Their inability to achieve rapport or their unwillingness to set aside preconceptions and seek to adapt themselves to a community's expected norms would be serious problems. Difficulties about whether observation, recording and/or questions are appropriate challenge the practice, especially when they cause changes that affect the nature of the phenomena of interest. Finding ways to bring into focus what is taken for granted either by the researcher or the researched is vital to the ambition to see what actually goes on rather than what is imagined or claimed about what happens.

In addition to gaining rapport and access, or meeting willing hosts, field research entails phases of participation and observation, usually simultaneously, and reflection, reporting, dialogue and further reflection to test one's interpretation, attempts to write so that the sense of presence and reflexivity are conveyed, and perhaps other modes of dissemination. It is likely, of course, that an academic will make use of their fieldwork in teaching students at all levels, benefiting them with the fruits of recent experience of the real lives of religious people.

Fieldwork, like many other tasks, is best learnt by doing it. Only so much guidance can be given before 'trying it out' is needed. Commonly, therefore, it is advisable to conduct a pilot project of limited duration and focus in order to test one's ability to gain rapport, practice reflexive analysis, determine what skills one already has and what one needs more advice about, and similar issues. Not everything that a researcher learns in one place will be useful elsewhere, but there are basics that are at the heart of fieldwork: gaining rapport, bracketing preconceptions, being empathetic, being reflexive, recording data and planning outcomes. Personal preferences, character and serendipity play significant roles in selecting topics for research, gaining access to groups, noticing or mistaking elements of value to the project, being ready to learn from others or be corrected by them, and finding colleagues with whom to discuss or collaborate. Balancing interest in a particular religion or specific group with a focus on clearly defined scholarly questions will provide secure foundations for any project.

Fieldwork is a hybrid activity, combining not only various kinds of participation and various kinds of observation, but also entailing sometimes asking questions, sometimes checking facts and impressions, sometimes wondering what an experience means. It arises from the notion that some kinds of activities require presence and participation and are better understood from within the messy living reality than from the safety of the margins. It most certainly challenges the researcher to leave the apparently safe position of a study or a library and to get involved. The questión is always: how far should researchers participate, how much should they get involved and is it possible to go too far? However, there are strong arguments in favor of field research. Most importantly, if research methods should be suitable to the phenomena of interest, and if religion is an activity, practice, performance or lifeway, then researching religion requires some level of participation if it is to generate full understanding.

Before you go (out into the field), it may be good to know that, despite all his faults, Malinowski hoped that fieldwork would 'supply us with a sense of humor' (Malinowski 1954: 145). Taking one with you would be a great advantage—by that means, you are likely to enjoy the experience so much more.

Notes

1 It helps to think of 'drama' even in relation to ordinary, everyday, habitual, dull or routine acts because even these more common aspects of 'doing' or 'living' religion are elements in the full experience that researchers are trying to appreciate, understand and think sophisticated theoretically informed thoughts about.
2 The 'atheist' rhetoric is largely part of a positioning of the study of religion as something different to theology rather than a programmatic, definitive or methodological insistence on the falsehood of religion.
3 Further arguments in this direction might engage fruitfully with the work of Bruno Latour (1993, 2009) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998).
4 See Hubert Knoblauch's chapter on video analysis in this volume: Chapter 2.22 Videography.

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Further reading

Fieldwork in Religion

International peer-reviewed journal publishing current fieldwork-based research including reflections on processes and methods. Published by Equinox, London. www.equinoxjournals.com/FIR.

Bailey, C.A., 2007. *A Guide to Qualitative Field Research.* Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Comprehensive guide to fieldwork from selecting a topic to publishing outcomes.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds), 1998. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: theories and issues.* SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks, CA.

An important orientation to fieldwork and other 'qualitative' (rather than 'quantitative') research, including historical, ethical and political considerations of how researchers engage with other people.

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R. and Shaw, L.L., 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

The best guide for writing notes during fieldwork and beyond.

Hammersley, M., 2008. *Questioning Qualitative Research: critical essays.* SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Provocative essays on continuing developments and debates about fieldwork which should be essential reading for anyone interested in the future of qualitative research—for example, debating whether our focus should be discourse or action.

Orsi, R.A., 2005. *Between Heaven and Earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, Oxford.

An internationally significant scholar of religion reflects on fieldwork.

Rice, P. and Ezzy, D., 2005. *Qualitative Research Methods.* 2nd edn. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

An accessible introduction to qualitative research with a wealth of helpful advice and clear instructions.

Spradley, J.P., 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Especially excellent on the mechanics of fieldwork, asking questions.

Spickard, J.V., Landres, J.S. and McGuire, M. (eds), 2002. *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: reshaping the ethnography of religion.* New York University Press, New York, London.

Invaluable collection of essays about how researchers come to know and present their understanding.

Wolf, M., 1992. *A Thrice Told Tale: feminism, postmodernism and ethnographic responsibility.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fascinating and engagingly presented discussion of 'responsible' ways of doing fieldwork that should not only be read by feminists and postmodernists.

Key concepts

Care: Research requires various forms of care, especially towards those among whom scholars research (which may also be called 'respect') and towards the conventions and relevant debates of the wider academic community.

Dialogue: A development of participant observation in which researchers discuss their emerging interpretations and arguments with those among who they research, thus strengthening the often weak claim that such people are 'informants'. Dialogue can test whether one's observations coincide the experiences or ideas of others. It can also aid in clarifying understanding of what 'insiders' take for granted.

Drama: 'Drama' emphasizes that the 'doing' of religion (in rituals and in the mundane acts of everyday life) is the chief focus of fieldwork research. It does not imply that religion is necessarily spectacular or theatrical.

Empathy: The practice of assuming an attitude of interest in other people's lives and concerns. It is developed by feeling or thinking oneself into others' habitual and motivated lives.

Epoché: Conscious bracketing out of researchers' prior assumptions, ideologies and expectations. 'Bracketing' should not mean 'ignoring' but considered awareness of factors that might unduly influence research (while among other people or when analyzing data) and working to avoid this.

Rapport: Establishing and maintaining friendly and/or trusting relationships with others. Seeking some kind of mutual interest. Getting involved more emotionally than merely participating can imply.

Reflexivity: A development of participant observation in which researchers devote time and effort to considering the experience of being involved in religious acts. The more participatory phases of fieldwork might provide researchers with a sense of 'what it is like' to be a full participant or 'insider'. Reflecting on this provides an additional way of analyzing data and enriches the published result by enhancing description and argument.

Respect: Respect is a methodological tool, requiring effort, that can underlie and/or be expressed in care, rapport, empathy and dialogue. It need not involve liking or agreeing with those among whom one researches or those whose scholarly arguments one debates. However, it requires unprejudiced presentation of others' views and experiences, taking into account local protocols, and at least polite explication of one's reasons about disagreements.

Related chapters

- Chapter 1.2 Comparison
- Chapter 1.3 Epistemology
- Chapter 1.4 Feminist methodologies
- Chapter 1.6 Research ethics
- Chapter 2.13 Interviewing
- Chapter 2.15 Phenomenology
- Chapter 2.19 Structured observation
- Chapter 2.20 Surveys and questionnaires
- Chapter 2.22 Videography
- Chapter 3.1 Auditory materials
- Chapter 3.3 Material culture

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