

Chapter 4

Playing with Perspectives

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GETTING STARTED

In the preceding chapters, the researcher in the field of the study of religion was introduced to you the reader, as a meaning-maker who studies other meaning-makers. One notable characteristic of human meaning-making is the abundant use of dualities. Academic meaning-making, regardless of the object of investigation, complies with this tendency. Nature provides several of these contrasts, which in turn become invested with a metaphorical status, as though representing cultural phenomena. Thus day and night, light and dark, young and old, male and female, hot and cold, left and right, obtain extra meanings when invoked metaphorically. Oppositions also form the basis of much scientific reflection. In instances where options have to be worked through and people, whether in religion or in academia, make choices that are unlike the choices made by others, the issue of how to reach a considered, sensible and valid position comes to the fore.

The choice discussed in Chapter 3, to accept either quantitative or qualitative methods, illustrates the dualistic nature of scholarly worldview. When addressing this seemingly technical question, we are immediately confronted with multiple pairs of opposites, such as objectivity and subjectivity, researcher and researched, rule and deviation, empirical and non-empirical and social and individual. Then we also encounter the imaginary divide between reality “out there” and “in here,” or mind and matter. Making any choice has consequences. The implications of accepting this dualistic way of thinking in the study of religion should not be underestimated. The consequences influence not just methods, as techniques, but methodology in the wider sense, guiding our behaviour as we design and undertake our research projects, or when we report our findings. Moreover, in the worldview field,

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human (Droogers 1996, 1999, 2012, Huizinga 1952, Turner 1982, 1988). As I will show, this approach is useful where theoretical or methodological discourses collide within academia, but it is also relevant in relation to inter-religious conflicts and dialogue. Methodological ludism can be helpful in handling options and contrasts. It provides a means to avoid the pitfalls of unilateral positions. Taking an eclectic position is possible.

My test case in this instance is the following: Does the believers' conviction that the sacred (or the divine, supernatural, or transcendental) can be experienced and is open to communication, play a role in the study and explanation of religion? If so, what role does it play? If not, why not? These questions are loaded with dichotomies. First, I will sketch the problem of scholarly understanding in more detail, mapping the alternatives. Then I describe the human gift for play and elaborate on its application to methodological ludism. I then provide an example of fieldwork experience in which methodological ludism was applied. In conclusion, I explore the relevance of this approach when dealing with the other dilemmas outlined.

TRUE KNOWLEDGE

The problem of the search for true knowledge tends to present science and religion as different camps. Science is frequently acknowledged as being critical of religious views. This leads to the question of whether believers' manifest experience of supernatural entities or forces can be admitted as evidence in the explanation of religion. Two ways of meaning-making, one religious and one scientific, collide in this confrontation. The position taken in this debate depends on yet another methodological problem. In order to understand a particular worldview, how far can and must one identify with it and participate in it? Here the researcher's role can be decisive.

What complicates all of this, is that the worldview field itself is hopelessly divided. Religious spokespersons often make exclusive claims regarding truth, condemning the ideas and practices of other religions, and criticizing secular worldviews, thereby strengthening oppositions and antithetical positions. Both secular and religious worldviews tend to condemn and exclude each other.

Dualistic thinking is common to both science and religion, even though different sets of oppositions appear to be at issue. If this divisiveness is by definition part of the scientific study of religion, how can we handle this opposition in such a way that our understanding of religion is enlarged and not hampered? Contrast should not obstruct comprehension.

The case is more complicated still. The scientific and the religious fields are not just opposed, but also intertwined, even when strict objectivity is the rule. Since our intention is to study religion via scientific methods, we directly stumble into the peculiar circumstance where the scholarly method and worldview are already part of the field we study. This is the case simply

dualities abound, even at the very moments when they are denied or suppressed. For example, monotheistic religions are inherently dualistic (God's reality versus human reality), whereas within Asian religions reality is seen as being one, not two, as singular rather than dualistic.

Examples of the oppositions flourishing across the field of worldview studies are plentiful. As we saw, we have the choice between neo-positivist and constructivist positions, both organized around other binary sets of options. Neo-positivists emphasize the stark contrast between researcher and researched. Constructivists, however, view both parties as having cooperated in producing knowledge, albeit by playing different roles, and thereby tone down the sharpness of the distinction that they nevertheless recognize to exist. Scholars also have to decide how to move along the spectrum between objectivity and subjectivity. Moreover, in explaining religion, many models are put forward, all with their own sets of contrasts, often expressing a strong predilection towards one of the poles of a spectrum. They may, for example, choose between individual agency and imposed structures, or between external conditions and inner predispositions. Sometimes predilections towards particular ideologies, such as liberalism or Marxism, play a role.

An awareness of the manner in which one deals with dichotomies is needed. Whether one opts for a distant objective approach, sought via quantitative means, or for a participatory subjective role, often sought via qualitative methods, in either case the researcher's own views and position are important in drawing a roadmap through the landscape of the many options. This includes the way he or she handles the possible influence of his or her own worldview, whether religious, secular or ideological. It also involves taking a personal stand on other worldviews. It may be that personally held views on "scientism," that is, the view that empirical science produces the most reliable form of knowledge, implicitly or explicitly also play a role in making choices.

Whether one is a champion of objectivity or intent upon the responsible uses of subjectivity, in either case, the researcher's role and views need to be made explicit. These views may be considered a handicap, especially if objectivity is a primary goal. On the other hand, they may come to be viewed as an asset that locates and anchors the researcher who is comfortable with the idea of subjectivity firmly within the context of his/her research. In both the distant objective and the more engaged approaches, personal locatedness is at issue.

I offer a rather idiosyncratic solution to the problem of the exclusivity of competing perspectives, whether paradigms, methodologies or worldviews. My solution, tentatively developed here, is that even competing views, regardless of their mutually exclusive characteristics, can be combined and used simultaneously. However, this is only possible if the human gift for play can be fully recovered for methodological use. One should learn to play with oppositions. I have called my contribution to worldview research "methodological ludism," ludism being a neologism, after *homo ludens*, the playful

because the demarcation of the field, as we saw in Chapter 2, is the result of the application of these methods, and is therefore influenced by implicit and explicit choices. There are therefore multiple maps of the field available, each offering differing interpretations of the boundaries. Though religion is a common sense category, taken from everyday vocabulary, students of religion have their own ways of defining the term and the boundaries of the field, and may even boycott the term completely (Asad 1993, see also Droogers 2009). Inevitably we look at religion through science's spectacles, every scholar having his or her own lenses. The fact that secular worldviews were usually not viewed as part of the field of religion shows that the opposition has drastic consequences, depriving scholars of opportunities to study interesting worldviews and draw fruitful comparisons. The label "religion" remains dominant, whereas the term "worldview" has gained only limited acceptance.

This leaves us confronted with a problem that would seem less difficult if our field of study focused on secular phenomena, such as kinship systems or youth culture. Though we would be involved to some extent with these matters (kinship and youth being part of our own experience), the study of religion is very much a worldview in and of itself. The study of religion, from its very origins, is marked by its object and could itself be approached as an integral part of the field it explores, precisely because it called it forth and determines its limits. Both researchers and the researched are finding their way through their own repertoires of dualities (Droogers 2009: 277). Accordingly, in discussing the methodology of the study of contemporary religion, we will have to find a way to deal with the consequences of this similarity between researchers and researched. Aside from an obvious and deeply embedded contrast, there is also similarity between meaning-makers, and this may offer a solution to the problem.

So far the focus has been on the contrast between religion and science. Let us now turn to look more closely at secular worldviews. Even though secular worldviews themselves tend to identify with science because they result from the scientific critique of the religious worldview, their study can nevertheless be viewed in the same way as research on religious worldviews, as a way of meaning-making about meaning-making. Precisely because science inspired the secular worldview, the contrast between science and religion plays a role here as well, albeit in an indirect way. Moreover, although empirical verification is viewed as crucial to secular worldviews, there are always axiomatic presuppositions that usually remain implicit, as with science. These may include altruistic expectations, but also basic ideas such as the supposed moral goodness of human beings.

Personal experiences concerning worldviews may influence the scholar's perception of religious and secular worldviews. In the study of worldviews this must be taken into account, even when researching secular worldviews, and despite the claim that these worldviews share a scientific status. The constructivist critique of neo-positivism applies here as well.

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

In the 1970s, in the Congo, while conducting Wagenia fieldwork on religious change, I studied the local Kimbanguist church, as mentioned in the previous chapter. It was a church that came from an African initiative, having started in 1921 in the Bakongo area as a prophetic movement around the person of Simon Kimbangu. Having developed my own set of preferences, I must admit that at the time, as a young anthropologist, wishing to see African cultures spared from drastic modern influences, I sympathized with the aims of this church because it sought explicitly to be African. Knowing what missions had done to cultures, the case seemed particularly interesting to me since no missionary effort was involved. During that first period of fieldwork I very much enjoyed my visits to this church. However, when I returned after a few years, the national leadership of the church had begun to raise funds for a huge church building near the capital. I cringed at what I saw as the exploitation of the low-income members, who from Sunday to Sunday were urged to pay for a building that they probably would never see. In addition, the hierarchies in the church had been strengthened and the leadership had gained power. Aware of my own subjective perception, and even though I was trying to be as objective as humanly possible, I had developed a clear sense of antipathy, my subjective view adapting to changing circumstances.

One of the explicit methodological decisions that we need to make when we study worldviews, is that some form of objectivity is needed. This speaks for itself in neo-positivist approaches, in which objectivity is a central norm. But even in adopting a constructivist perspective, one has to define a position, perhaps even more so because of the stronger awareness of the working of subjective factors and of cognitive constructions. Besides, the emphasis on worldviews as constructions can lead to a reductionist critique of religion that is not very different from the (neo-)positivist rejection of religious worldviews. The conditions under which a worldview emerges receive attention in constructivist methodology as well. In any case, the researcher's own worldview presents a possible challenge to objectivity. It may also be that he or she has an opinion about worldviews other than his or her own, whether religious or secular, either sympathetic or critical, which directly or indirectly influences the results of his or her research.

As relevant as the objectivity ideal is the role that subjectivity may play in the study of worldviews. This is true not only in the negative sense, as a sin against objectivity in a neo-positivist framework. As we saw already, subjectivity can be an asset and a research tool, especially in a constructivist perspective where knowledge is the result of the encounter between researcher and researched. An awareness of the role of subjectivity in that process will help to determine the validity of the results that are obtained. If subjectivity need not hinder the task of seeking objective results, to what extent can it be useful, and how can objectivity be guaranteed?

In the matter of the study of religious worldviews, the tension between objective and subjective factors may be more obvious than when a secular worldview is the object of research. The question is a consequence of the fact that religions do not obey the scientific rule that only what can be proven to exist empirically does exist and can therefore be considered as true. However, even a secular ideological utopia, whether Marxist, liberal or some third way, may not stand the test of empirical verification either. Yet, the question is more perplexing in the case of religion.

Scientific efforts to understand religion have to find a way to handle the fact that the perception that is essential to the believer's experience is denied by science. In the study of profane topics, science presupposes the validity of the perception of the reality it claims to examine. In the case of religious themes it denies, or at least abstains from providing an opinion on the existence of super-natural reality (which is why this reality is called super-natural or non-empirical). The understanding of religious worldviews is put at risk by denial.

BERGER'S THREE METHODOLOGICAL POSITIONS

The most common way that the scientific study of religion has tried to overcome this problem is by taking into account what people say about their religious experience and observing how they act. At the same time, the strategy is to abstain from venturing an opinion on the question of whether the other reality "really" exists, simply because its existence cannot be proven empirically. Peter Berger (1967) has labelled the latter position "methodological agnosticism," the adjective "methodological" suggesting that the researcher may hold a different opinion in private, but that in his or her research, for methodological purposes, he or she avoids expressing any opinions on that matter. In his typology, Berger includes two more possibilities. "Methodological atheism" denies the existence of the supernatural reality on empirical grounds. "Methodological theism" accepts the existence of a supernatural reality that manifests itself, even though it cannot be known fully by humans.

In fact the three positions reflect the discussion that started with modernization, the process by which the results of science and technology are applied in society. Viewed from some distance, the debate is part of modern culture's quest for a corresponding worldview. Students of religion are the children of their times. They are challenged by the subject of their study, simply because religion, just like secularization, is at issue in their own culture.

Berger's tripartite typology refers to researcher's positions, not to the field or followers. The standard methods of a given discipline will influence the degree to which the scholar comes up against the problem of distance or nearness, as we saw when quantitative and qualitative methods were discussed. Anthropologists of religion working principally with participant observation (and not all do) will differ from sociologists of religion who work

principally with surveys (and again, not all do). Moreover, the question of the researcher's views on the believer's claims can be avoided by shifting the emphasis to the question of how the believer's faith experience can best be described. In that case Berger's three positions become less urgent. A follower of scientism, on the other hand, will give much more attention to the contrast between the truth claims of science and religion, since science is thought to produce the best "conceivable" knowledge.

To relativize the question, it should also be mentioned that not all believers are preoccupied with the absolute nature of religious truth. The stereotype of a believer cognitively defending the truth of his or her faith may be the invention of the academic atheist critic of religious truth, who draws a stark contrast between the believers' view and his or her own position. The recent attention given to fundamentalism certainly nourishes that image. Besides, if religion is viewed primarily as experience, then the cognitive side becomes less important and is often limited to the person's interpretation of his or own reality, not the supernatural reality.

In my view, methodological agnosticism and atheism do not differ much in practice, because both (though admitting the believers' views on the supernatural to their description) refuse to give the believer's conviction a place within the explanations that they offer. The first refuses it because nothing can be said about it with certainty, the second because it can be said with scientific certainty that the presumed supernatural reality, already super-natural, is not real at all. Since the believer experiences that denied reality, the question that remains is whether the researcher can permit him or herself to deny or ignore the existence of such an essential part of the study field without losing insight into the matter. This means we should look for a way to enable methodological atheists and agnostics, as researchers, to be able to stick to their view on the presumed reality of the supernatural, and yet do justice to what the believer considers to be the core of his or her convictions. How can a position that solves the researcher's problem be reached in such a way that the research is not compromised and the person being researched feels understood?

The case of methodological theism is not without questions either, even though it appears to give the supernatural a central place. Which supernatural notion is defended, of which religion? The supernatural force or entity may be thought to manifest itself, but it does so in as many different ways as there are religions. Even within one religion there may be striking differences. The methodological theist who, in private life, is a follower of a particular religion, will have to find a way of qualifying the manifestations of the divine or supernatural beyond his or her own religion. This would demand a theology of religions. Theoretically several positions are then possible, from the exclusive claim of one religion, to the acceptance of the presence of the minimal supernatural or divine in all religions, each in its own way.

In the latter case, the perception of the supernatural, as a universal notion, inevitably has to pass through the sieve of the human experience. Then the cultural context intervenes, creating diversity from a source that

is viewed as homogeneous. Within this cultural perspective the supernatural is thought to be less concrete and less personal in origin, a vague and relatively empty notion, to be filled in by concrete religions. It is the minimum that a maximal number of religions have in common. In most cases, however, religious heterogeneity does not combine easily with the general view of the methodological theist. Scholars of the phenomenology of religion in particular, have pointed to similarities between seemingly diverse religions (Sharpe 1975: 224). In the religious field, some of the newer religions seek to bring together what they consider to be the best elements of existing religions. Yet there remains a tension between the supposedly universal supernatural and the elaborate forms it takes in concrete religions.

REDUCTIONIST EXPLANATIONS?

Agnostic, atheist and theist methodological positions are not just about religions' truth claims. They also have consequences for the way religion is explained. The basic question is whether religion can be sufficiently explained, in a reductionist manner, in non-religious terms (psychic, social, economic etc.), as methodological atheists and agnostics would. By contrast, according to the methodological theist view, an explanation must include the notion that supernatural reality manifests itself as believers affirm from their experience. If believers' statements are to be taken seriously, the question arises as to how seriously. Should they be accepted only to the extent that they help to explain the religious in a reductionist manner, that is, by how they were derived from, or stemmed from the non-religious? Or is it conceivable that the believers' explanation of religion provides evidence of the existence of the supernatural?

The problem is familiar to anthropologists who study cultures, usually a culture other than their own. The method of participant observation is meant to give voice to the practices and views of the people studied. Here too the question arises regarding how insiders' views can best be appreciated, in comparison with the fieldworker's views. Anthropologists use the terms *emic* and *etic* (derived from phonemic and phonetic), as shorthand for the subject's and the fieldworker's positions and perspectives. The distinction does not prevent overlap between the two points of view, but shows where indigenous and exogenous data and interpretations come from.

It should be mentioned that methodological agnostics and atheists generally do not find the question of the value of informants' truth claims very interesting or important, since they view the reductionist position as the only viable one. Their position has often been nourished by the conviction, now maintained only by a minority of scholars, that religion will not survive the secularization process. Science is thought to have contributed to this predicted effect by suggesting that the existence of the supernatural cannot be proven empirically.

Some of the main theories that explain religion in a reductionist manner, like those coined by Marx (religion as a way to survive oppression) and Durkheim (the real object of religion is the group, society), stemmed from the bewilderment experienced by their authors when forced to recognize that religion was so resilient. Since, in their view, this resilience could not be the consequence of the existence of the supernatural, to them it was obvious that such an illusion could only survive because it served important non-religious purposes.

Modernization has not put an end to religion and on the contrary seems to have stimulated its continued existence. Religion plays a functional role for the very people that are subjected to the negative effects of modernization. And even those who have prospered within the context of modernization may trace their wealth to divine blessing. This means that the supernatural continues to seem real to many people, justifying the search for an answer to the question of how the views of both sceptics and faithful can be part of the study of religion.

PLAY

Participant observation involves a double perspective, combining involvement and distance, inside and outside. The same can be said of play, an important ingredient of methodological ludism. Much has been written about the subject, and in very diverse ways (e.g. Caillois 1958, Handelman 1987, Kolb 1989, Norbeck 1974). This variety seems to leave room for a perspective on play that offers a solution to the problems we are discussing. I define play as “the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality” (Droogers 1996: 53). In the spirit of this definition, the qualitative method of participant observation can be characterized as playful, even though not all fieldworkers are aware of the fact that they are playing, or at least playing with *emic* and *etic* roles. The adjective “subjunctively” in the above definition is borrowed from Turner (1988: 169), who introduced the contrast, yes, yet another one, between the indicative “as is” and the subjunctive “as if.” The liminal phase of ritual, with its inversions of hierarchy and symbolism, and its experiments with the normal, is characterized by this subjunctivity. Turner (1988: 169) also points to the political dimension of play. In suggesting alternatives, play can be a threat to vested authority. Its subjunctivity makes it subversive.

Furthermore it should be noted that the emphasis in the definition I suggest is on a human capacity. Bellah (2011: 74–83) traces the origins of the capacity for play in human evolution. The emphasis on human capacity is also present in my definitions of culture (roughly the capacity for meaning-making), as are worldview (the capacity to raise and answer the five basic questions, expressed in the seven dimensions), and power (the capacity to influence other people’s behaviour). Each of these was discussed in Chapter 2. In all cases both the capacity and its product are taken into account. The emphasis on human

capacity therefore allows for the making of a perspective on the dynamics of processes and avoids static descriptions of the concrete results of these processes: culture and not just cultures; worldview and not only worldviews; power and not just the powers that be. In play, even the "as if" and the "as is" can be combined, parallel to capacity and what it brings forth.

Simultaneity is essential to the definition of play in that it suggests the possibility of combining contrasting views. The primary connotation of play is that it is the exception from the normal, the wink, the double entendre. It suggests a stereophonic environment, an inner dialogue of different orders, of contrasting sets of rules.

Play is not necessarily the opposite of seriousness, because once a playful situation exists, it is taken seriously and is no longer "just a game." That is the reason why play is not always recognized as such. Any form of play demands a serious attitude. If you do not take the game seriously, you are a spoilsport.

In Western society work appears to have gained the monopoly on seriousness, and play has virtually been exiled to the domain of leisure and sports, where it has been commodified. Paradoxically play generates serious work and income for some, but remains a relegated separate sphere to others. Yet, this hijacking of play should not prevent us from returning it to the legitimate place it occupied for a long time, even in the West.

Play can be discerned in a number of human phenomena. Religion is the most obvious example (see also Bellah 2011: 91–116). Natural and supernatural realities are combined, subjunctively and simultaneously. The supernatural becomes a possibility, different from human reality, separate and extraordinary. The "as is" finds its complement in "as if" and the other way around. Religion has been viewed by several authors (Fernandez 1986, Van Baal 1972, Winnicott 1971) as dealing with the paradox of humans being, at once, part of nature or society, and yet autonomous, reflecting on the world, including nature and society, from a distance. Play is a way of both being part and yet standing apart.

Another common practice that is facilitated by play is the use of metaphors. Metaphors happen thanks to a playful exchange between separate domains. Every time a metaphor is used, a clear image from one domain is combined with another domain that needs clarification. When somebody suggests that life is like a wheel, he or she is playing with two domains that together represent an experienced reality. Religion makes intensive use of metaphors and tends to reify them to the "as is" sphere.

METHODOLOGICAL LUDISM

Play can serve to solve some of the problems at issue here. In my view, Berger's three alternatives do not exhaust all of the options. There is a fourth possibility, that I call "methodological ludism." It does not suffer from the limitations that are part of the three positions that Berger put forward. In a way it also elimi-

nates a core problem. Methodological ludism is in part inspired by constructivist arguments. The human capacity for play, "to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality," is used to gain access to the best of two worlds. The researcher assumes the role of *homo ludens*. He or she makes an effective use of play by occupying varying positions, if only for as long as is necessary to understand what the seemingly contrasting positions look like, whether of science and religion, researcher and researched, outsider and insider or *emic* and *etic*. He and she might situate themselves as part and apart, subject and object, believer and atheist, faithful and faithless, body and soul, religion B (or C) and religion H (or I, or J), or, even neo-positivist and constructivist. That being the case, truth claims can be studied closely. The emphasis on strong oppositions can be mitigated and gaps can be bridged, if only as a thought experiment and for a short while. Since play is not instrumental and has no function to which it can be reduced (Huizinga 1952: 14), it is a perfect and impartial tool to explore a field beyond the commonly drawn boundaries of scientific knowledge. Methodological ludism launches the academic carnival.

The scholar of religion could acknowledge moreover that the believer is of the same *homo ludens* genus. Several of the dualities just mentioned can also be found in the believers' experience. The scholar and the believer have more in common than the established contrasts suggest. The believer is also gripped by the tension of being a part of and standing apart, of being both subject and object, of having to combine body and soul, and of having certainties as well as doubts (Horton 1993: ch. 7). Although believers generally tend to be too serious to admit that they are playing with reality, in fact it is what they do. The need for a transparent worldview, plus the role that power plays in maintaining and promoting that way of looking at things, buttress the absoluteness of the perspective taken. Especially from the margins of the religious power centres, religious innovators seek out and test alternatives to official views and practices. Not only magic (the production of religious views and practices that are considered illegitimate by the leadership), but also new prophetic movements or other revivals, renewals and reforms, belong to this category in the margins. If religion is counted as a way of playing seriously with the possibilities that a supernatural reality offers, the truth claim suddenly becomes less compelling. Yet, it is not just a game, since seriousness is essential to play. It is this exaggerated seriousness that is the pitfall of any exclusivist religion, causing external strife and internal oppression. Here too the dualistic straitjacket can be shed. Like scholars, believers would be liberated. World peace would be served. But let us return to the study of religion.

The scholar's playful shift from one perspective to another need not demand a final farewell to one position and the permanent embrace of the other, just as the believer need not abandon the supernatural when accepting that religion is play. The basic intention is to understand, by experience, what the opposite pole is like. Afterwards one may continue on the course of the objective outsider, the convinced neo-positivist, the orthodox believer, or the staunch atheist. But by playing this game, one may have gained understand-

ing. Methodological ludism makes it possible to move successively through the three positions that Berger defined, and go beyond them, ignoring the influence of unilateral researchers' and science's standpoints. The sedentary scholar can become nomadic again, the hedgehog may turn into a fox, if only for as long as it seems useful to do so.

One should ask whether the researcher's prescribed objective distance from the reality experienced by the believer does not stand in the way of insight. Especially in relation to qualitative fieldwork on religious world-views, such a question cannot be avoided. Since constructivists view the interaction between researcher and researched as the source of knowledge, this includes participation in the religious experience of the respondent. As shown in Chapter 8, participation may even mean sharing gossip, including feelings of guilt and betrayal in the researcher, yet delivering new information and insight. Constructivist arguments could be advanced to suggest that it is important to get as close as possible to the thought processes, religious or secular, that people employ to interpret reality. Equally, the researcher's thought processes, as part of the enterprise, should be made explicit and not excluded from the research context.

Ironically constructivist scepticism about the empirical reality that most neo-positivists say exists autonomously out there leads constructivists to pay special attention to religious reality, the existence of which neo-positivists in turn are very sceptical about. The critique against the dominance of the neo-positivist tradition makes scientific knowledge a relative form of knowledge. Consequently the step towards the appreciation of religious views as relevant knowledge is a small one. Though marginalized by the secularization process, they can be rehabilitated. Again methodological ludism may serve as the effective means by which to do this.

For anthropologists, participant observation is the method that almost defines their trade. The term itself contains a paradox. Anthropologists have to find a way to overcome the opposition between participation, with its subjective rapport and close contact, and observation, suggesting the need for distance and objectivity. Somewhere on the spectrum between the poles of participation and observation they will have to situate themselves, making a simultaneous use of two roles, participant and observer. Some form of identification is implied, but at the same time distance is necessary. This seemingly schizophrenic method has been applied now for more than a century and there is sufficient evidence to accept that it works and that its internal contradiction is not its weakness but its strength.

I became a strange hybrid, caught in a no-man's-land betwixt and between cultures, learning something of a visited way of life yet relying heavily on my own. But perhaps it is precisely in the clash between world-views, in the tension between symbolic systems (how reality is defined, the body held, experience articulated) that some anthropological insights emerge. (Desjarlais 1992: 19)

This model can be put to good use in the service of methodological ludism.

EARLIER EFFORTS TO BRIDGE THE GAP

play allows for a double perspective and can help bridge the gap between researcher and researched. This effort is not new. In the history of the study of religion, the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl has inspired scholars in the field of the phenomenology of religion (Eliade 1969, Van der Leeuw 1956, Widengren 1969, see also Cox 2010, Momen 1999) to get as close as possible to phenomena and to describe them without prejudice. The subject's experience is the important source of knowledge, for example about religious phenomena, and should be studied through empathy. The scholars within this tradition have been criticized because the boundary between their professed objectivity and practical subjectivity was not always clearly delineated. Their Christian background, if applicable, was thought to frustrate understanding from within. Yet their serious effort to move inside a worldview should be seen to be an early example of a playful method at work.

Similarly Max Weber's interpretative sociology, centred on the concept of *Verstehen*, offers a way of understanding the meaning that the actor, consciously or unconsciously, gives to his or her actions, within a context of mutual understanding, and drawing from a "world of meanings" (Käsler 1988: 178). The method has both quantitative and qualitative traits. Weber saw this approach as an empirical sociology that aimed at the understanding of meaning through the construction of pure "ideal" types (Käsler 1988: 176, 177). Weber did not go so far as to opt for a method that was applicable to the "human sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey and his school did however, and invested empathy and intuition with great significance. To Weber, causal explanation and the statistical verification of a hypothesis remained essential for interpretation (Käsler 1988: 178). In contemporary terms, Weber was more a neo-positivist than a constructivist. Yet, though he put much emphasis on the role of instrumentality in people's meaningful behaviour, this certainly was not the only type of meaning he looked for (Käsler 1988: 179). In summary, though not in a radical manner, Weber's interpretative sociology paid close attention to the method of understanding the actor's meaning-making. Weber obliges the researcher to take the position of the researched and *Verstehen* can be understood as a form of methodological play in the sense outlined above.

Turner's contribution to the understanding of play in ritual has been mentioned already, but he had more to say about the concept that is of interest to us (Turner 1988, see also McGilchrist 2010). According to Turner, play is presented as the interface between the right and the left brain hemispheres. These halves differ in function. The right hemisphere enables synthetic and holistic thought. It mediates the perception of space and houses information that is organized in patterns. The left half is more analytic, enabling linear thought and assessment of time, the latter especially important in the analysis of causality. It also makes speech possible and houses any sequentially organized information. Where the right half sustains the idea of the whole,

the left half is the seat of dichotomous thinking. The two are therefore very complementary. Play assures the link between the two halves. Ritual, understood as a form of play, stimulates both hemispheres and creates a sense of wellbeing, even ecstasy and mysticism, in an experience of unity, above fragmentation, contradiction and paradox.

The idea that play is grounded in the abilities of the human brain can also be found in so-called connectionism, inspired by cognitive studies. It defends the idea that human knowledge is not only organized in a sentential verbalized form, the prerogative of the left hemisphere, but is also stored in the right hemisphere as "non-linguistic chunked mental models" (Bloch 1991: 194). People are able to consult the information available in these models in a parallel nonlinear way, carrying out "thousands of tiny computations simultaneously" (D'Andrade 1992: 29). The phenomenon connectionism is focusing on is therefore also called Parallel Distributed Processing (PDP) (D'Andrade 1992: 29). Parallel processors that are connected with each other in networks are supposed to be able to handle lots of information simultaneously and in a very short time. Once a conclusion is reached, it can be verbalized in the familiar sentential manner. Viewed in relation to the neurobiological information that Turner used in the early 1980s, the right brain hemisphere is the locus of the PDP, whereas verbalization takes place in the left half. An interesting aspect of this model of human knowledge organization is that the scholarly habit of thinking in dichotomies can be put into context as a manifestation of the analytic left brain hemisphere, whereas overview and synthesis are much more connected with the simultaneity that is typical of the right half. Multivocal symbols, with their rich patterns of meanings, can also be situated there. Play, as the simultaneous reference to different orders, combines synthesis and analysis, and functions as an interface.

Finally, another approach that is of interest to us is phenomenological anthropology, or perhaps phenomenological ethnography (Jackson 1996, 1998). Notions such as embodiment, experience, narrative and reflexivity are central in this approach. "Direct understanding and in-depth description" are the goals of this approach, and phenomenology is presented as "the scientific study of experience. It is an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing" (Jackson 1996: 2). Reification of concepts, including dichotomous terms such as subjective and objective, and the subsequent "certification" (Dewey in Jackson 1996: 8) of the world through previously legitimated words, including the term culture (Jackson 1996: 18), is condemned as a hindrance to internally derived knowledge. Humans "live their lives independently of the intellectual schemes dreamed up in academe" (Jackson 1996: 4). Moreover, this approach suggests that pre-established schemas represent power interests that impede engaged scholars' efforts to improve the world and the quality of life. A worldview in Husserl's terms is primarily a life-world (*Lebenswelt*), or in Pierre Bourdieu's terms a *habitus*, more than a system of thought (Jackson 1996: 6, 13). In a constructiv-

ist manner, the communication between subjects replaces the us/them, the universal/particular and the objective/subjective dichotomies. This does not mean that the researcher lacks awareness of the influence of his or her own situation. On the contrary, this awareness nourishes the wish to look at the world from the vantage point and with the metaphors of the researched (Jackson 1996: 9). Interestingly Jackson (1998: 28–32) includes play within his vocabulary of phenomenological anthropology. In his view simultaneity and the subjunctive also form part of an approach: “Play enables us to renegotiate the given, experiment with alternatives, imagine how things might be otherwise” (Jackson 1998: 28, 29). “Mastery play” gives people the feeling that they control their world and make existential choices, even though nothing really changes (Jackson 1998: 30).

THE PRACTICE OF METHODOLOGICAL LUDISM

Methodological ludism is easier to formulate than it is to put into concrete practice. Though the mindset needed to apply it can be assimilated, the experience of implementing it in fieldwork settings is not so easy. Only recently, an effort has been made to map the methodological difficulties and challenges (Knibbe and Droogers 2011).

Several problems present themselves when translating methodological ludism into a research tool, as Knibbe’s experiences illustrate. She completed her MA fieldwork within the context surrounding the Dutch spiritualist medium and healer, Jomanda. Interestingly Jomanda presented her approach as a new science, thereby making the tension between science and religion part of the fieldwork that Knibbe had to work within. Medical “intelligences” from “the other side” performed operations on patients, using sophisticated methods that were as yet not available to earthly medical science. Jomanda encouraged people to collect proof, including pictures, of the effect of the work of these intelligences. Truth claims came to the fore, in an almost positivist sense. Though ideas were part of Jomanda’s package, the basic experience was corporeal, inevitably so, the goal itself, healing.

In her fieldwork Knibbe adopted the attitude of methodological ludism, as suggested by me as her supervisor. And yet she soon discovered that the simultaneity that was presupposed proved difficult to implement. Adopting Jomanda’s viewpoint and seeking to experience the effect of the healing intelligences, she discovered that it had become impossible to keep sufficient distance, in the fieldworker’s usual observing way. Even between participation and observation it was difficult to commute, once the participation became total. Containing her own sceptical frame of reference within parentheses, Knibbe “religiously” followed all the instructions that Jomanda gave to her audience, for example when seeking a solution to a personal problem. Participation in the ludist manner meant that Jomanda’s worldview was learned, substituting previous frames of reference, such as the safe scientific world-

view that Knibbe was used to applying both professionally and in her personal life. Learning a new frame of reference meant learning new ways of experiencing and perceiving what happens during the healing services but also in everyday life. She moved beyond the bounds that the three methodological postures coined by Berger share, between science and religion, and fully into the religious area. Thus she understood the "economy of hopes and fears" (Knibbe and Droogers 2001: 292) that predominated in Jomanda's healing sessions. This was much more than an intellectual exercise. It was a bodily experience. She learned to interpret the signs that the "other side" gave off through Jomanda, trusting that in the end all would be well. The seriousness of play led her to behave as she did. The "as if" became "as is."

Since the simultaneity was not possible in practice, Knibbe came to the conclusion that there should be an end to the game, unless she intended to continue being Jomanda's follower, never to return to academia. The method of ludism therefore proved to contain an existential risk: after learning Jomanda's worldview, Knibbe also had to unlearn it. The simultaneity of the theoretical model of methodological ludism requires a commitment to a linear set of timeframes. After being part of the context, she had to move on consciously, to stand apart again, to be de-conditioned. In terminating her fieldwork and in writing her thesis, she succeeded in unlearning. Having gone to the opposite extreme, she acquired insights that would have remained undiscovered were she to have adopted an attitude of methodological agnosticism or atheism. In hindsight she also discovered the risk that methodological ludism involved. Only then was she aware that the experience served as her rite of initiation into the trade of anthropology. In subsequent fieldwork she found it much easier to enter into the life-world and experiences of the believers that she studied.

In hindsight, Knibbe also realized that during her initial fieldwork she had exaggerated the engagement of Jomanda's visitors, and downplayed the scepticism that had been expressed among them as well. They too had to find a way to change their frame of reference, at first standing apart and then becoming a part, in order for some of them to stand apart again afterwards. The basic playful attitude to religion, usually hidden behind the exclusive claims and absolute certainties, allows for doubt and uncertainty. If religion is fundamentally a testing of possibilities, then criticism and rejection are a substantial part of it. For one can imagine that where the study of religion basically entails the meeting of two or more worldviews, a movement towards identification and a movement towards detachment may occur. The logic behind these two movements is indicated in Chapter 11 in which religion is interpreted as being simultaneously intimate and strange for the student of religion: religion is "our intimate stranger."

Students of religion might also consider playing the role that theologians, though not always going by this name, have played so far in particular religions, in this case for religions in their totality. This applied side of the trade will be discussed in Chapter 10.

When proposing methodological ludism, I had not foreseen what it might do to the fieldworker. Knibbe's experience serves as a warning that ludism may provide unexpected outcomes, especially in initial fieldwork contexts. I should, for example, have recalled the stories about fieldworkers who went into the field, never to emerge again, along with the reports on fieldworkers who were converted permanently into the religion they were to study.

Religious and secular worldviews alike may moreover be totalitarian and anti-human in their demands, as history has sadly shown. Participation along ludist lines can then become impossible. What German Nazis or the South African apartheid regime did on the basis of their worldviews cannot be easily studied in a ludist way. Yet, these worldviews should be studied, but by other means. Empathy has its limits.

Methodological ludism is also engaged scholarship. It obeys the ethical code that the quality of human life and the freedom of human meaning-making should be respected. Participation certainly has its risks and limits. In such situations the researcher may choose to study a morally malign worldview from the perspective of its opponents, taking sides in the conflict, especially in view of the ethical code just mentioned. Meaning-making can be lethal and worldviews can be destructive.

When all is said and done, the risks inherent in undertaking ludist fieldwork are part and parcel of constructivist presuppositions regarding the interaction between researcher and researched, producing insight and knowledge. This indeed means bidding farewell to the safety of the neo-positivist methodological positions that Berger offers, conditioned as they are by the contrast between science and religion and between researcher and researched. The playfulness of methodological ludism opens up a different perspective, riskier and having its limits, but also more promising. It challenges the fieldworker to be initiated as a meaning-maker among the meaning-makers.

IN CONCLUSION

The playful approach provides the opportunity to rethink a number of problems that accompany dualist thinking. The oppositions that serve as signposts in the landscape of academia facilitate mapping, but tend to impose mutually exclusive options. Especially when these are institutionalized, they limit academic priorities, restrict the allocation of scarce resources such as research funding, academic posts or publication opportunities, and they frustrate scholarly progress more than they stimulate it. The academic landscape is parcelled out.

In the study of religion, and especially of worldview changes in the moving target context of modernization and globalization, going beyond established dichotomies will open new perspectives and provide new insights. A ludist approach serves this goal. Instead of being seduced into opting for one position over an alternative, scholars could adopt the playful approach in order

to access the best that two worlds can offer. The universal human capacity to deal simultaneously with two ways of categorizing reality can be applied to the sets of contrasts that have haunted the study of religion since its inception. The basic goal is that the scholar adopts each alternative position successively, if only for the amount of time required to understand it. To understand one's own position is rather easy, but to get the feel of an alternative view may be much more difficult. Yet it will be worthwhile if our aim is to rethink the old and worn-out categories imparted by one generation on other. Even if a conclusion returns the researcher to the position where he or she began, the exercise will have been valuable. This effort will produce a better map of the field of study and result in improved scholarly debate.

Though it may seem ambitious, the playful approach can be of use in at least three areas that form part of the study of religion. These three areas include the theoretical framework used, the methodology adopted, and the applications available. Though this volume is primarily about methodology, theory and their applications also relate to the methodological debate.

With regard to the theoretical framework, the contrast between science and religion must be rethought, including the way religious and secular worldviews oppose each other. This includes the question, dear to believers, of whether the experience of the supernatural is relevant to the understanding of religion. Explanations of religion can be reappraised. A playful approach opens a new perspective for understanding religion. The seriousness with which religions present themselves has misled scholars of religion. They failed to recognize the less knowable aspects of the playful believer. In both religion and academia, the unilateral options that govern most of the existing paradigms may be cast in a different light. The epistemological problem posed by the neo-positivist and constructivist approaches can be appreciated anew. The problem of exclusive truth can be relativized, while still maintaining the right of any believer to take his or her conviction seriously. The only requirement is that he or she must give an occasional knowing wink.

As far as method is concerned, the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods and all the theoretical implications that stem from that relationship, can be reconsidered in a playful manner. I propose that it is necessary to experiment with methodological ludism as a way of going beyond the three positions that Berger suggested. Knibbe's research experience shows how the ludist position, though not free of risk, can significantly increase insight into the contexts we study. Part of the risk seems to stem from the existential need for certainty and from guarding personal parameters. Here too, play can be taken too seriously and thus begin to operate in disguise. Yet once this is understood, the path to new understanding lies open.

When applying the knowledge obtained in the study of religion to the problems that humanity is currently faced with (Droogers 2010), the playful method may prove to be enormously useful. Conflicts abound, between and within religions, often leading to violence and killing. The principles that inspire the playful method can be tested when believers – or scholars! –

defend exclusive views. The variety of religious forms currently in existence may be the cause of problems, since living among differences is demanding. The need for inter-religious dialogue becomes more compelling each day. Though it may sound utopian to suggest that the playful approach may serve to assist in solving these problems, I see genuine potential here. I return to this theme in Chapter 10.