UNIT 6: SURVEYING THE LITERATURE

In some essays and dissertations it is appropriate to have a formal section entitled 'Literature Review'. In others the review of literature may simply comprise part of the flow of the essay, and the literature review itself (engaging with what has already been written) may take place throughout the whole essay. In the latter case, however, it is often advisable to devote a few paragraphs early in the essay to summarising the scholarly work that has been done in the field to date. If in doubt about the best approach to a particular essay topic, consult your tutor.

When researching a topic you will doubtless consult reference books, and also quite possibly the Internet. You are not normally expected, however, to include encyclopaedias and reference books in your literature review. You may well use them to help you 'get your head round' a particular topic area as has been noted previously, but they should ideally not form part of your literature review. Encyclopaedias, reference books, text books and introductions all rely on the scholarship that you are being asked to explore. It is best therefore to leave them out, and go straight to the scholarship.

The internet offers an excellent means to search for scholarly literature in a given area. Electronic gateways, and search engines like Google Scholar, are excellent means for sifting through huge databases in order to locate relevant scholarship on a subject.

Focus

When reviewing the literature in a field it is important to achieve focus. Your essay or dissertation may fit neatly into a discipline, or, more likely, it may cross the boundaries of two or more disciplines. You should not attempt to review ALL the literature in the relevant disciplines. You will need to make decisions about which items are relevant to your essay. It is sometimes helpful to mention the names of key scholars or seminal, defining, works in certain areas, because these works have spawned traditions of thought or approach. For example if the subject of your essay was contemporary approaches in the psychology of religion, you might mention Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and some of the titles of their relevant major works. You might perhaps make a short assessment of their contribution and comment on how their thought has influenced later theories. However, you would not spend a great many words on this, because this is not where your focus is located. You would spend your words on analysing the work of contemporary scholars, who may well have been influenced in one way or another by Freud and Jung, but whose own work is the focus of your essay.

Charting relationships

When writing an essay it is always important to consider the title and the issues it raises from many different angles. The same is true when assembling the literature that will be reviewed in your essay. You will need to find out what has been written not only on the topic of your essay, but also on the different *approaches* to the topic of your essay. When

studying religion, it is often tempting to base your essay on your own already–formed opinions about the topic in question. You need to 'step back' and become aware of the different theoretical and methodological approaches that are possible, and what their strengths and limitations are. A literature review enables you to show that scholarship offers a variety of perspectives on any issue. Scholars from different disciplines (or even from within the same discipline) will disagree with each other, and arrive at different conclusions based on different assumptions, points of departure and approaches. In assembling the material for your literature review you need to give thought to showing this diversity, and in writing you need to 'map' the agreements and disagreements. In other words, you will need to tell your reader who agrees with whom, who has been influenced by whom, who is at odds with whom, and why.

One purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate your grasp of the scholarly debates in a particular area. Another purpose is to show how your own arguments fit in with the debates in the field. Sometimes (though not always) a good essay offers a fresh perspective on an issue that has not been covered in quite the same way in the published scholarship. To show how your ideas are 'different', you need to show, first, what ideas are currently in vogue; second, why these ideas are limited in their scope or explanatory value; and third, what new insight your work will contribute. To put it another way you need to engage critically with the scholarship that has gone before. This does not mean that you need to disagree with all that has gone before, just that you are able to 'position' your own arguments in relation to what has gone before. As well as showing who agrees with whom, who has been influenced by whom, who is at odds with whom, and why, you need to show whom you agree with, disagree with, are influenced by, and why.