UNIT 3: TYPES OF TEXTUAL SOURCES

'Primary' and 'Secondary' Sources

Broadly speaking, **primary sources** are those that can supply evidence that has a bearing on the case you are trying to make. Depending on your field of study, this evidence could come in various forms, including:

- the sacred texts or foundational documents of a faith tradition, such as the Bible or the Qur'an;
- published texts by authors whom you are studying — for example, if you are writing on some aspect of Thomas Aquinas' theology, the *Summa Theologiae* is likely to be a major primary source;
- unpublished documents, such as correspondence, records and other archival material that contains historical information and evidence: for example an archive of letters;
- data from your own or others' empirical research, such as the transcripts of interviews, notes from ethnographic fieldwork or the returns from (your own) survey questionnaires;
- material from internet sites.

Secondary sources are works (usually academic books or journal articles) by other scholars that offer critical interpretations of your source material or of your field of study more generally. They might offer answers to the same questions that you are trying to answer, and you might agree or disagree with their answers, but their opinions do not constitute direct evidence either for or against the case that you are trying to make. It is important to refer to secondary sources for at least two reasons: first, because the opinions of other scholars can help you get to know the field and develop your own judgements; second, because almost any piece of academic research is a contribution to an ongoing conversation or debate, and you will need to show that you are acquainted with earlier contributions to that conversation or debate.

The distinction between primary and secondary sources seems clearer in some fields than others. In biblical studies, for example, a biblical text would be a primary source, while a commentary on that text would be a secondary source. Even here, though, things might not be entirely clear-cut: for example, if your research interest centres on the history of the interpretation of a particular text, then Patristic, mediaeval or Reformation commentaries on that text might be primary, not secondary, sources for you. It is also worth noting that a secondary source in one field might be a primary source in another: if you are a New Testament scholar, Karl Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans might be a secondary source, but if you are working on the early theology of Barth, it will be a primary source.

A primary source may also provide data which is first-hand evidence of an event or

period. For example, D. A. Binchy's 'St Patrick and his Biographers' is an article about the evidence for St Patrick (hence a secondary source), but *Hood's St Patrick* (Phillimore, 1980) contains the Latin text and translation of St Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola*, which are primary sources. Another example of the primary/secondary debate may be seen in this example: A.C. Bhativedanta Swami Prabhupada's *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is* (1972) would normally be seen as a secondary source for the study of the *Gita*, because of its interpretive nature. However, in a study of Prabhupada's thought, or of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, this text would be a primary source. *In general, however, the distinction between primary and secondary sources is that between the kind of work that provides evidence, and the type of work that provides interpretive, critical and analytical perspectives on that evidence.*

Using Primary Sources

At postgraduate level (though depending somewhat on your discipline) you will be expected to engage with primary sources. If you do not have access to such sources directly, you will at least need to be aware of the primary data they contain. For example, if you write a paper on Peter Glob's theory that the writings of the Roman writer Tacitus prove that bodies found in Danish bogs are those of priests as opposed to criminals, you must separate his interpretation from Tacitus' own words (which he cites). Arguably the best way to do this is to go and get a translation of Tacitus' *Germania* from the library and read it separately from Glob's book. It is worth making the effort to find out what the primary source says, and how Glob interprets this source. This is one simple way of critically assessing Glob.

Quoting Primary and Secondary Sources

Academics quote much more from primary sources than from secondary ones. Primary sources are worth quoting because they are evidence, for example like a witness statement in court. Secondary sources are opinion and there is no need to quote them if you are only quoting something you could say in your own words. Hence there would be no point in writing out a quotation from a recent article which read: 'in 1059, the papacy embarked on a scheme to remove secular control over elections'. It is an *opinion* and if you were to cite it, you would say 'Davies has argued that the decree of 1059 was chiefly an attempt to remove secular control over elections' with a reference (e.g. Davies, 1979, 89). This is citation, not quotation inasmuch as you are referring to someone's interpretation, not repeating their words. If you get an idea from a reading, it is important to reference the secondary work from which the idea comes, but if it isn't primary evidence there is little need to quote it.

Monographs

A monograph is a book written on one central topic. Unlike a textbook/general book it is essentially an original critical exploration of a problem or question, like a longer form of an article, sometimes like several related articles on a particular theme. Monographs are the closest form of book to a dissertation – indeed many monographs were

originally dissertations, rewritten slightly. Textbooks and general books are written to provide a narrative introduction to, or thematic survey of, a topic. They are not necessarily a model for any of the types of academic writing which you will perform as they are in general more descriptive than analytical. The style of writing in a monograph is the model which you will need to follow.

Articles

An article is essentially the same thing as an essay. It is a work of between about 3,000 and 12,000 words. It is usually not divided into chapters, though it sometimes has sections and sub-sections. It is referenced either with footnotes or abbreviated references in the text. Usually it is problem-oriented. Even if its title does not always ask a question, the article usually has a central question. An article submitted for publication in a major journal e.g. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* would normally be accepted for publication only if it is passed by anonymous peer-reviewers. In many ways the style and format of the journal article perhaps comes closest to that of the academic essays you will be required to submit as part of your MA programme.

It is often noted that as one moves from study at undergraduate level to that at Masters level, one usually makes more and more use of journal articles. The real debates in scholarship most often take place at first in the journals. Journal articles are shorter than books, they present a particular argument rather than surveying a field, and they are published much more quickly. Students working at an advanced level therefore really need to be familiar with, and keep abreast of, the leading journals in their field.

Sub-Academic Writing

Popular books and magazine articles (e.g. *National Geographic*) are not intended to present a comprehensive, specialist, and in-depth treatment of a topic. They may contain bibliographies and references, but these will be selective, not exhaustive. They can be very uneven in terms of quality and it is important to consider who is writing them. Professional scholars sometimes write popular books to promote their subjects/themselves/their bank balances. Often popular books are authored by enthusiasts or professional writers and may be of somewhat dubious quality in terms of their knowledge of research in the field.

Reviewing Academic Work

Academic work too can be a varying quality. How would you be able to distinguish between publications that make for sound academic reading and ones that do not? You can always ask your tutor, but also it is good to develop a 'nose' for what is likely to be good. Book reviews, a type of sub-academic writing, and often published in academic journals, provide useful pointers on how to evaluate the quality of an academic publication.

Reviewing and refereeing the work of other scholars is a standard academic task, with

its own special skills. The writing of a review requires the reviewer to acquire more detailed knowledge of a work than may be possible through a quick reading. The task of writing a good review requires the balancing of a range of factors. A review should ideally highlight both the strengths and limitations of a work, but not disproportionately. Reviewers must be mindful of being fair in their criticisms and not simply flaunt their own expertise. Overly acerbic reviews may damage the reviewer's/review editor's relationship with author or publisher.

The way to acquire knowledge of the methods of reviewing is to read through the review sections of a major journal in the field. Note the proportion of space accorded by reviewers to different tasks: for example the summarising of the overall contents of the book, the discussion of individual points, the evaluation of key strengths and weaknesses, and the noting of typos/literals. Note also what information of a bibliographical nature (collation details, publishing information, price) is provided.