

THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER PROBLEM IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

A Reader



Edited by

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London and New York

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PREFACE



The idea for this series entitled *Controversies in the Study of Religion* goes back to conversations I had with Donald Wiebe at his office in Trinity College, University of Toronto, around 1990. One of the problems with the way in which the study of religion is taught in both the undergraduate and graduate setting is that instructors often present their data as self-evident; they fail to identify for their students the complex and contested theoretical, definitional, and methodological issues that have shaped the field over the past 100 years. What we decided was that the field needed a series of in-class anthologies that put into instructors' and students' hands influential essays discussing these ongoing debates and controversies. In this way, not only would students confront the so-called data of the field (the assorted myths, rituals, traditions, and institutions they learn about), but they would also examine the often hidden background issues, assumptions, and problematics so necessary to any scholarly field. In a word, they would develop critical thinking skills. This series attempts to fill just this need.

Although several volumes are currently in various phases of preparation, *Controversies in the Study of Religion* opens with this volume on the insider/outsider problem, one of the most important issues confronting scholars who study human behavior, institutions, and belief systems. Despite the fact that I have my own particular interest in how this debate is settled, this anthology is meant as an inclusive introduction to the larger issues and various stands currently available to the scholar of religion. Therefore, I have attempted to provide useful, fair, and accurate introductions to the issues and, in my selection of essays, to reprint creative avenues into discussing issues of theory and method in classrooms. That my selections hardly exhaust the sources that can be consulted on the insider/outsider problem will be evident from the many references and detailed endnotes that accompany each essay. Because of this wealth of material I have decided not to provide lists of suggested readings; each essay's references are suggestion enough. Also, despite my own personal commitment to gender inclusive language, as well as my thoughts concerning

Preface

the antiquated nature of such terms as "primitive" or "archaic religion," I have not tampered with, or "corrected," the language of the authors represented here. Apart from making its own individual contribution to the issue at hand, each essay in this collection is also an example of scholarship at one particular moment in history, suggesting that the essays can profitably be read on any number of levels.

Where some of the essays may already be, or soon might be, considered classics, others arise from books or journals possibly not known very well to some in the field—all of which, however, deserve to be known. For readers who may need some additional information to understand portions of some essays, I have added the occasional editor's footnote to explain a concept or a foreign language phrase. Finally, although the anthology will no doubt be used in a number of different, creative ways by instructors (e.g., as the sole resource for a class, augmented by readings in their own class readers, or as a complement to various theme-based course books), I would recommend that the collection is most useful if the essays—or at least the parts—be read in order for the insider/outsider problem builds as the anthology progresses.

For their assistance in conceptualizing both the series and this volume, I must thank Willi Braun, Gavin Flood, Rosalind Hackett, Darlene Juschka, Jack Llewellyn, Tim Murphy, William Paden, and Donald Wiebe. In addition, Jeff Ruff deserves my heartfelt thanks not only for discussing and proofing the introductions but also for optically scanning and initially formatting many of the essays. Although the series was initially conceived at the University of Toronto, I am grateful for the support of the Departments of Religious Studies at both the University of Tennessee and the Southwest Missouri State University where this particular volume took shape. Finally, I must thank Janet Joyce at Cassell for her foresight and enthusiasm for this project.

Russell T. McCutcheon
Springfield, Missouri

As we say in German, *können* is not *kennen*, we might say in English *to can*, that is to be cunning, is not *to ken*, that is to know; and it would then become clear at once that the most eloquent speaker and the most gifted poet, with all their command of words and skillful mastery of expression, would have but little to say if asked what language really is! The same applies to religion.

F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion*, 1893

If we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone any place for the study of religion within them.

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 1982

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION



Can You Climb Out of Your Own Skin?

Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he completed his examination of the wisteria vine he strolled back to me.

"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—"

"Sir?"

"—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee 1982: 29–30)

So wrote Harper Lee in her Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Originally published in 1962, it is the story of a small town lawyer, Atticus Finch, who defends Tom Robinson, a black man unjustly accused of attacking a white woman. Set in the Southern United States of the 1930s, the novel not only portrays the highly charged and highly polarized race relations that constitute the daily experiences of many people, both then and now, but also allows the reader to join Atticus in the middle of the swirling controversy. Although a white man, his commitment to the cause of justice places Atticus in the position to defend Robinson, a man who, in the public's eye, is presumed guilty from the outset of the trial. Throughout the novel, Atticus Finch moves across a number of boundaries—social, economic, and racial—negotiating his various crossings in ways that many of his contemporaries either cannot see or choose not to notice.

And so it makes sense that, after listening to his young daughter's complaints about her day in school, Atticus offers what seems to be simple, home-spun advice: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

What we have in Atticus's few words is the making of one of the most important issues in the study of human behavior and institutions, a problem which, in the academic study of religion, is generally termed the insider/

outsider problem. In a nutshell the problem is whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another. In other words, to what degree, if any, are the motives and meanings of human behaviors and beliefs accessible to the researcher who may not necessarily share these beliefs and who does not necessarily participate in these practices? Do students of culture have virtually unimpeded access to the intentions and meanings of the people, societies, or institutions they study or, to take the contrary view, are all human observers cut off from ever being able to see past their own biases, contexts, and presuppositions?

Simply put, *must we*, or *can we*, take Atticus's advice and climb out of our own skin? Can we ever walk a mile in the shoes of another? It is a problem that must be faced by all scholars of the human condition: psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, among others, must confront not only the question of *how* to study the intentions and actions of human beings and groups but *whether* such a study can take place at all. The first involves a question of *method* (what tools must we use to access the meanings and motives of our subjects); the second requires us to defend the *theory* of human cognition, behavior, and organization upon which our methods are based. Is the person we study, often termed simply as "the other," an open book, an enigma, or simply a neutral screen onto which the observer projects his or her own desires and fears? Depending on which of these three theoretical options we choose, our study will proceed in dramatically different ways, relying on different tools and methods, reaching significantly different ends.

Getting Inside by Studying Human Experiences

Clearly, Atticus believes that the gap between insiders and outsiders—a gap representing, for example, differences in class, gender, race, or religion—*can be*, and in fact *ought to be*, overcome, that one can leave one's own skin behind and climb into another's, if only for a moment. In fact, one could go so far as to say that many works of fiction generally presume from the outset that the reader can get into the skins and minds of their characters and vicariously re-experience their emotions and intentions. Although it is not the only narrative technique available to a writer, the common privilege enjoyed by the invisible, all-knowing narrator allows the reader to peer into the thoughts and wishes, fears and pleasures, of a character in a way not available to us in our usual social relationships.

There is a long tradition in scholarship that sees the researcher as having a similar—though not as extensive—privilege. Based on the assumption that certain tendencies, capacities, or, in a word, experiences, are shared by all human beings, one group of scholars maintains that the gap between the

subject under study can be overcome, with the help of the social sciences, or, more precisely, the social sciences themselves. In the social sciences, such as sociology or anthropology, such scholars would argue, there is no gap; for, contrary to the

This first option, which was dominant in the nineteenth century, sees the gap between the two as something that can be overcome in various aspects of life, such as chemistry, physics, and biology. In other words, the researcher in these fields can study insects, plants, and animals, and, by saying what we know about them, we have a *scientific* study of human beings as moral agents. In other words, on certain discourses, the relation to the subject is that beliefs are universal and cannot be reduced to constant laws, and we think Z.

The challenge is to get into the experience of the human perceptual object. When we study a *phenomenon*, we are critical, empathetic, and creative leap a step further, what one might call a *phenomenological* leap—literally, they have been interpreting the *hermeneutics* of the observer.

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subject under study and the scholar who happens to be doing the studying can be overcome, whether those gaps are in time (as in when one studies an ancient civilization through the science of archeology) or social space (as in when one studies contemporary groups different from one's own with the tools of sociology or anthropology). Despite their apparent agreement with Atticus, such scholars would, however, disagree with just how easy it is to overcome the gap; for, contrary to Atticus's advice, it is not a "simple trick."

This first option owes much to a split between what German scholars in the nineteenth century termed *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*—the former signifies the science (*wissenschaft*) of studying the spirit (*Geist*) while the second signifies the science of studying nature. The difference between the two, or so it was argued, was that unlike the sciences that study the various aspects of the natural world (for example, geology, astronomy, chemistry, physics, or even anatomy), the study of human subjects involved the researcher in studying questions of the meanings and intentions of these actors. In other words, it was held that human beings are far more complicated than insects, plants, rock formations, and even animals precisely because *we* have desires, hopes, fears, expectations, and reasons for doing what we do and saying what we say—reasons which may not be all that apparent from an initial study of those of our behavior that can be observed by an outsider. In a word, we have a *spirit*. Unlike the study of tornadoes and glaciers, for instance, the study of humans must take into account that human beings are conscious, free, moral agents. Unlike migrating birds whose behaviors can be predicted based on certain discernable regularities in the weather and the position of the sun in relation to the earth, humans are creative and therefore their behavior and beliefs are unpredictable. Accordingly, human behavior and belief systems cannot be reduced to the study of mere regularities, simple patterns, and constant laws, as if all human beings in situation W will do X, will say Y, and think Z.

The challenge, then, is to develop tools that will allow researchers to enter into the experiences and meanings of another, to access the private moments of human perception, thereby enabling one to bridge the gulf between subject and object. When applied to the study of religion, the field known as *phenomenology* is in large part devoted to developing techniques for non-critical, empathetic descriptions of human behavior as the basis for making a creative leap across the divide. Such empathy allows the researcher to develop what one might term a deep understanding of the actors' intentions and meanings—literally sharing their feelings and emotions. Understandably, once they have been accurately described and felt, the art of translating and interpreting the actor's experiences, behaviors, and claims (the art of *hermeneutics*), and restating them in terms of the language and experiences of the observer, will be necessary.

The Challenge of Building Theories from the Outside

Yet there is also an equally long tradition in European scholarship that would judge the desires of the other to be opaque to the researcher—sometimes even to the subjects themselves—thereby necessitating the development of special tools for the study of their motives and fears. This alternative tradition would not warrant the split between the sciences of the natural world and those of the spirit and would, instead, assert that as members of the natural world, human beings are just as prone to lawlike, predictable behavior as are molecules, rain clouds, and animals. Unlike characters in a novel, whose emotions and desires are transparent to the reader, the thoughts and desires of human subjects are not all that apparent. This group would maintain that the privilege routinely afforded the reader by the very structure of many fictional narratives (be it a film or a novel) is nowhere to be found in real life. One case in point would be the development of psychoanalysis where analysts employ a number of techniques to determine what they believe to be the subconscious roots of their patient's trauma, roots that are often intertwined with the patient's early development as an independent being. In particular, Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) theory was that because of the dynamic and anti-social nature of one's basic need for gratification (which Freud called the pleasure principle), these egotistical desires are by definition repressed and banished to the realm of the subconscious. Therefore, to study what Freud took to be the elementary but repressed and disguised aspects of human nature requires, from the outset, tools that bypass the conscious, waking, and rational capacities of human subjects who continually disguise, or often fail to recognize, their own basic desires and needs.

Whereas the first option outlined above emphasizes the scholarly outsider's ability to get inside and re-experience the subject's own experiences and states of mind, this option sees such a move as virtually impossible and instead concentrates on developing scholarly theories capable of explaining and predicting the complex patterns of human behavior. Where the first addresses issues of meaning and interpretation—based on the assumption that humans have spirits that set them apart from animals and objects—this approach is based on studying only that which can be observed empirically; its goal is to determine the causes and regularities of human actions and beliefs. That the theories these scholars develop often disagree with the explanations insiders themselves supply for why they have done or said something is to be expected because this group of scholars would argue that insiders do not necessarily have access to the same information as does the observer. The first group of scholars would see this potential conflict as evidence that empirically based theories that treat human behavior as a series of actions and reactions do not take the free creativity of the insider seriously enough.

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Understandings and Explanations

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When discussing these first two options, an important point to identify is the differing emphases that can be placed on both the word “understand” and the word “explain.” Much like Atticus Finch, the first group of scholars outlined above endeavor to understand the *meaning* of people's beliefs and actions, an activity which involves nuanced and accurate description of what the belief or action means to the insider followed by a creative interpretation which enables the researcher to find meaning in beliefs, symbols, and behaviors that may arise from a dramatically different world than their own. The German word *Verstehen*, associated with the work of those who practice the human sciences in the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*, communicates the full scope of what such researchers mean by “understand”: it is nothing less than a re-experience of the experiences of another. Such a view of the human sciences owes much to the German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Dilthey maintained that *Verstehen* entailed “re-living” the lived experiences of other people, our research subjects. In this way, Dilthey is often described as the father of the modern hermeneutical method. Derived from the name of the Greek messenger-god Hermes (upon whom successful communication with enemies and strangers depended), the art of hermeneutics is simply the art of correctly interpreting the meaningful claims and actions of other people, especially when their meaning is not altogether clear or certain.

Those scholars whose practice of the human sciences has been influenced by the alternative tradition identified above, namely *Naturwissenschaften*, would question this preoccupation with determining insider meanings. For them, human beliefs and actions are not studied as distinct sorts of productions, ones which entail meaning and moral value. Rather, as already suggested, they are treated as but one more instance of the complex workings of the natural world, a world which operates according to observable regularities that can be described and recorded. Based upon this assumption, the effort to study human behavior aims at developing not understandings but causal analysis, or, in a word, explanations (e.g., What caused this to happen?). Based on certain generalized regularities in their observations, generalizations which they might label as laws, such researchers attempt to determine the economic, political, psychological, etc., causes of behavior X or belief Y such that when factor W is present one might predict that behavior X or belief Y will follow. As such, these scholars look for general trends in the comparative data of human behavior that can be used to generate a prediction about a future state of affairs, a prediction which could either confirm or falsify their explanatory theory of human behavior.

However, given that all such theorizing is based on *inductive logic* (the method by which general conclusions about the world are drawn from repeated observations of particular cases), no such theory can ever attain unquestioned

status for, as in the case of the claim that "All swans are white" or "When released from a height the chalk will drop to the floor," one is never completely certain whether the next observation will confirm or falsify the theoretical claim, regardless of how well supported the theory has been up to this point in time. The clear dangers of placing too much confidence in inductively based conclusions should be more than apparent to us: we all have had experiences where our routine predictions concerning how the world works—predictions based on what seems like countless successful, unproblematic past experiences—have been easily shattered. Think no further of the last time you saw someone walk straight into a patio door which they thought to be open!

It should be clear, then, that there is a significant difference in assumptions between those who aim to understand the meaning of others' actions and beliefs and those who seek to explain the very existence or presence of these actions and beliefs. Where the former engage in the art of interpreting meanings the latter seek to explain observable regularities and predict future outcomes. That reliving experiences constitutes the focus of the first group should make perfect sense; that public, empirical, and therefore observable actions, claims, and statements hold the attention of the second group should be equally sensible. That each group has severe criticisms of the other should be more than apparent.

Methodological Agnosticism: Do Not Pretend that Conclusions are Certain

Where the focus on only studying private experiences seems to validate the claims of the insider all too quickly, and where the emphasis on developing explanatory theories can all too easily dismiss insider's claims, there is an option which some describe as a mediating position. Aiming to avoid both validating or dismissing, this third option attempts to remain neutral when it comes to questions of truth and value; instead, it emphasizes issues of accurate description and comparison at the expense of drawing value judgments. Simply put, this third option attempts to bracket out, or avoid asking, all questions concerning the truth of someone's claims. Termed *methodological agnosticism*, this option is grounded in epistemology (from the Greek *episteme*, meaning, knowledge), or the study of the conditions necessary for there to be knowledge in the first place. If the researcher does not necessarily participate in the world of the insider, a world in which it might make perfect sense to ascribe intentions and motivations to what the researcher may hold to be inanimate objects, then by what means can the researcher label the insider's claims as right or wrong, as healthy or unhealthy, as accurate or delusional? If the researchers' goal is not to evaluate (either positively or negatively) but simply to describe the diversity, similarity and utter complexity of human behaviors and beliefs, then they may opt for this mediating stance.

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Around 1869, the term "agnosticism" was coined by the early evolutionary biologist and essayist Thomas H. Huxley (1825–1895) to denote what we might simply refer to as a profession of ignorance: "It came into my head," Huxley later wrote, "as suggestively antithetical to the 'gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant" (Huxley 1900 vol. 1: 462). Whereas "gnostic" is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning to know a spiritual mystery, "agnostic" simply designates a lack of such knowledge. The term "gnostic" has long been applied to a particular religion, the Gnostics, which existed alongside Judaism and early Christianity during the first few centuries of the common era. This group claimed special knowledge derived from secret revelations.

Contrary to claiming any such special knowledge that transcended the knowledge gained through the reasoned use of our senses, Huxley proposed that agnosticism entailed the recognition that there are limits to what human beings can know and that it was idle speculation to try to settle matters which were beyond these limits (such as what happens after death). In his words, agnosticism

is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. That principle is of great antiquity; it is as old as Socrates; as old as the writer who said, "Try all things, hold fast by that which is good"; it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him; it is the great principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science. Positively, the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstratable. That I take to be the agnostic faith. (1901: 246)

It should be clear, then, that although the term arises with Huxley in the mid-nineteenth century, we can understand a number of figures in the history of European philosophy as having presumed this, or a closely related, stand when it comes to matters of knowledge.

To be agnostic does not mean one is a disbeliever (as is meant by the term atheism), but, instead, it means that one is in the position of not having sufficient information from which to make a decision on matters of truth. Admitting not to have the knowledge, then, necessitates a different sort of scholarship from that of those who claim to possess the privileged knowledge of either the empathetic or the explanatory observer. For example, given that to date there has been no empirical evidence sufficient to prove or disprove beliefs in the existence of an all-powerful, purposeful being who created, controls, and continues to direct the universe, some researchers have concluded that the only

productive manner in which to study those who make such a claim is to avoid arbitrating and evaluating and simply to begin describing, cataloguing, and comparing the various claims in favor or against the existence of such a deity. One who claims that a god either does or does not direct the world may be right; but then again, they may be wrong. In light of no publicly testable and debatable evidence one way or the other, there is little to be gained from trying to prove or dismiss such claims.

Somewhat similar to the manner in which Huxley defines agnosticism as a *method of analysis*, by methodological agnosticism one means that the researcher selects a number of tools, or methods of research, that purposely avoid asking questions of truth where there exist no means of acquiring empirical evidence to determine that truth. Of course to be methodologically agnostic hardly means that one is personally agnostic. While this may of course be the case, it may equally be that as a committed insider or committed outsider one recognizes the limited nature of the assumptions which constitute one's stand on such issues as whether there is meaning to life, whether anything happens after physical death, and whether there is a god. In both the cases of believers and non-believers, one may acknowledge that faith commitments are fundamentally important, commitments which may very well defy rational explanations and the rules of evidence we usually accept when making claims about the world around us. As such, to gain entrance into a public debate with people who hold different (possibly competing or contradictory) sets of commitments, one might opt for this neutral stance. Such a position is essential to the phenomenological method discussed above, a method of nuanced, neutral description which aims to take claims at face value and develop a complex comparative scheme whereby, for example, all symbolisms of snakes in worldwide mythologies are collected and cataloged. In this case the researcher has little interest in whether such myths are true or false. Instead, they are motivated by what they see to be the intriguing similarities or astounding differences of these narratives.

Reflexivity and the Relativity of Insides and Outsides

Apart from these three positions (empathetic, explanatory, agnostic), there is yet a fourth approach to the insider/outsider problem. It agrees in part with the first option outlined above: it is indeed important to study inner states and experiences of free, creative human beings. However, it also agrees in part with the second: there is a significant gap between researcher and subject. Finally, it differs significantly from the third in that the researcher and subject alike are both seen to be enmeshed in the human situation, making this much sought-after neutrality a mere illusion. The conclusion in this case is that the experiences that we as scholars are able to study *are none other than our own*.

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According to this option, all scholarship has an autobiographical aspect which is often overlooked or sometimes outright ignored and disguised. However, because it is presumed that all human beings share similar experiential states, researchers can bridge the gap between insider and outsider through generalizing their own personal experiences—insomuch as researchers are themselves human beings embedded within the same complex worlds as their subjects—to those experiences of other human beings. Where the first option bridges the gulf between insiders and outsiders by determining the insider's experiences through nuanced interpretive tools, this option bridges the gulf by means of projecting the researcher's own experiences onto the other. It is a position best understood as the reflexive stance.

This emphasis on reflexivity is largely dependent on a recent development known as postmodernism, a diffuse scholarly tradition that arises from such fields as literary criticism, art, and philosophy. Although one would be hard-pressed to offer one definitive definition of postmodernism, we can at least suggest that it is a way of looking at the world which emphasizes playfulness and differences over rules and sameness; it stresses the metaphoric and slippery nature of language over the modernist, objective, factual understandings of how communication proceeds; it addresses the manner in which meaning is not something possessed by a word, an action, or an object as much as it is the product of a series of relations which comprise the word or the object.

According to postmodernists, any one word in this present sentence—for example, the word “word”—has meaning precisely because of the words which appear on either side of it, and they themselves have meaning insomuch as words appear either side of them, and so on, and so on. If we take this to the logical end—if there is one—sentences, paragraphs, chapters, whole texts, libraries, let alone all the books you have already read and the experiences and actions of all other authors and all other readers all come together in a complex system to produce the thing we call meaning. It is a system of inter-relations that we often overlook, to our own detriment, or so the postmodernist might inform us. For to overlook this game of meaning-making which we are all playing is to mistake metaphors for stable facts, to misperceive active processes for stable entities, to misread verbs for nouns and re-presentations as mere presentations. These were all the mistakes of modernism, according to postmodernists. And so, when the French postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida says, “there is no outside the text,” what he seems to imply is that readers and writers, observers and subjects, outsiders and insiders, are all equally immersed in the same pool of meaning-making, making it all up as they go along. We are all in the text; there is no way out and there is no position of luxurious all-knowing or neutral narration.

The reflexive stance is a position which addresses the manner in which all observations are inextricably entwined with the self-referential statements of the observer. For example, the sentence, “There are no facts” can itself be

taken as a straightforward, factual statement—or can it? Or, a better instance would be the widely known example, “Rule number one, there are no rules.” What does it mean to say something like this? Does it contradict itself? And if not, by just what authority can such a rule be exempt from itself? For scholars who adopt the reflexive option, studying others explicitly involves a high degree of reflexivity, a turning back onto the researcher of his or her own questions and answers. Claims that the researcher is able to make objective or neutral claims about the world at large are therefore highly suspect to the reflexive scholar for she or he would maintain that the world at large is just what it is for you or I *precisely because* you and I are what, who, and where we are. For instance, our choice of question shapes the answer we will receive; interviewing just the men of a society will tell us just as much about a researcher’s presuppositions and biases regarding who counts in a society as it tells us about the society under question. Reflexive scholars, therefore, are more interested in questions of point of view and the stance of the observer than they are with issues of neutrality, objectivity, and fact. They are like artists who paint themselves, their subjects, and sometimes even their audience into their own canvases, allowing the observer to see the artist painting the picture of the artist painting the picture of the viewer watching the artist paint a picture; all of this challenges the viewer to see themselves actively viewing, even making, the picture a picture.

Where does it stop, you might ask. For the reflexive scholar, it never does. Like those word puzzles where you circle the letters that form a word, whether the letters run backwards, forwards, on an angle, horizontal or vertical, human experience goes on and on in all directions and is constantly in the process of constructing new meaning and reality. Your job as a scholar is simply to jump into the middle of the puzzle, in the middle of life, and start circling words, making metaphors and meaning. For, like life or language, the meaning game was up and running before you arrived on the scene at birth (after all, none of us invented the languages we speak) and will continue to be played long after you depart from the stage. We simply popped up in the middle of it.

Plan of the Book

This volume is an introduction to the manner in which scholars studying religion have negotiated the controversy over insiders and outsiders. Each part opens with a brief introduction that outlines some of the key features to the readings and excerpts which develop a coherent position in answer to the problem. In these introductions readers will find what we might label a road map that will assist them in reading the pieces and identifying some of the central issues and assumptions important for understanding the issues in question. Each of these parts then closes with one or two readings that

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highlight some of the shortcomings to this particular way of addressing the insider/outsider problem. In this way, the reader can follow an argument while it builds and then acquire some of the tools necessary for critically engaging it.

Part I provides a theoretical background to the issue, offering a selection of classic readings from such fields of study as linguistics and anthropology where much of the terminology and techniques relevant to this issue were first developed. In particular, we will meet there the terms "emic" and "etic" which are often used to refer to the positions of insiders and outsiders, respectively. Part II traces the development of studying private religious experiences empathetically as the means for overcoming the gulf between insiders and outsiders. Part III moves to the emphasis on ascertaining the observable and predictable regularities in human behavior which allow the observer to study human behavior objectively. Part IV differs from both of these positions by offering the option known as "methodological agnosticism" which, it is maintained, enables the observer to remain neutral when it comes to ascertaining the truth or falsity of the beliefs under study, making the observer neither an insider nor an outsider. Part V applies the notion of reflexivity to the study of human behavior and highlights the degree to which scholarship on religion is surprisingly autobiographical. Finally, the last part offers essays on recent events in the news that challenge students to push themselves in understanding human behaviors.

This volume is designed to allow instructors and students to trace several coherent, competing approaches to one uniform problem in the study of religion. By extension, the reader will become familiar with a number of related issues in the field as well as a number of writers, both past and present, who have made significant contributions. By its very nature, this problem is equally applicable to virtually all other sciences of the human condition, and so, despite the high degree of specificity of the readings, the collection should be of relevance to students outside the study of religion.

Although there will be no one way of using this collection of readings, their order and presentation lends itself to a format in which each reading or position as a whole is explored descriptively and then investigated through in-class debates or seminars where students are challenged either to develop and apply in greater detail the position in question, or to delineate a line of reasoning capable of criticizing its assumptions and findings.

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INTRODUCTION



The Study of Religion as a Cross-Disciplinary Exercise

Because much of the original work on the insider/outsider problem has been done in fields outside the academic study of religion, it is only fitting to open this anthology with essays that arise from fields outside the study of religion. The academic study of religion has developed into a cross-disciplinary field that draws on the work of a variety of scholars: any book on the subject will more than likely build on the work carried out by anthropologists, scholars of antiquity, economists, historians, literary critics, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, to name only a few. The various stands that scholars of religion take to address the insider/outsider problem owe much to work carried out in these fields. The four pieces in this part represent the work of Horace Miner, an anthropologist, Kenneth L. Pike, a linguist, Alasdair McIntyre, a philosopher, and Clifford Geertz, also an anthropologist.

However, prior to introducing these four readings, we need to discuss two concepts of basic importance to the insider/outsider problem, concepts originally used in the study of language but quickly adopted by anthropologists.

Emic and Etic Defined

Emic and etic are technical terms that Kenneth Pike (1967) originally derived from the suffixes of the words "phonemic" and "phonetic"; the former refers to any unit of significant sound in a particular language and the latter refers to the system of cross-culturally useful notations that represent these vocal sounds. Although both words are derived from the same Latin root (*phōnēma*, meaning "sound"), *phonemic* designates the complex sounds themselves while *phonetic* specifies the signs and systems scholars devise to represent the manner in which the basic phonemic units of a language are to be pronounced and compared. For example, according to the International Phonetic Alphabet,

reprinted in the front of most dictionaries, the character that represents the sound made by the first consonant in the word, *zip*, is *z*, whereas the related but slightly different sound produced by the *s* in the word *vision* is designated by the character *ʒ*, both of which are not to be confused with the sound made by the letter *s* in the word *sip* (designated by *s*) or the sound of the *sh* in a word like *ship* (designated by *ʃ*). Even though the same letter may be used in spelling certain words (such as the *s* in *sip* and *vision*), in practice the letter is pronounced in many different ways. The characters of the Phonetic Alphabet provide a way to specify and symbolize these differences. Moreover, knowing how the *d* sounds in a word like *dog*, combined with our knowledge of the specific sound of the *s* in *vision*, allows us to combine the two sounds to represent what the *j* sounds like in the word *jam* (its Phonetic Alphabet character therefore is the combined *dʒ*).

The point of all this is that while the phoneme represents the various units of sound that combine to produce a spoken word in a particular language (and any one language will have a specific, sometimes unique, set of phonemes upon which it is based), the phonetic representation of these sound units is based on an outsider's attempt to transcribe and compare these sounds in relation to a system of written characters that can be used in the study of all languages. Accordingly, phonetic analysis has an explicit comparative aspect to it.

That spoken sounds in just one language, let alone many languages, are a complicated affair is evident. To the proficient users of any language this may or may not be an interesting issue; after all, they are involved in using, articulating, developing a language for certain practical purposes. To these users the varied ways of producing the *s* sound might all just appear to be self-evident. But to a non-user of this language, the ways in which these subtle distinctions are produced by speakers is intriguing. How is it that one word comes out of our mouth and is not confused with another? And how can we compare sounds produced in two different languages? Speakers simply seem to know that they must shape their mouths and tongues differently to vary the sounds they produce. For example, think of the many sounds designated by the letter *o*, whether alone or in combination with other letters: goat, got, wagon, boil, boot, book, poor, pour, brow, and sour. Scholars who study phonetics will examine the mechanics of speaking these various words: if and how the tongue touches the teeth when the sound is produced (e.g., a lingual-dental such as *th*); how the lips are used (e.g., a labio-dental, with the teeth touching one lip, such as the sound of an *f*; a bilabial, produced with the two lips, such as the sounds of the *p* or *b*); or whether the tongue and the soft palate (the rear roof of the mouth) is being employed to produce a sound in the back of the mouth (such as in lingual-velars like *k* or *g*). Phonetics scholars, then, develop a comparative basis which is itself outside the language systems they are studying (after all, no language users write in the Phonetic Alphabet) to study not simply one language but *the phenomenon of human language itself*.

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Therefore, we can while the "etic view system," the "emic system" (1967: 37) F. An important clarification to be equated with language users are this or that sound interested in *studying produce*, a sound fact he is a student of the speaker of the language there is a difference discussing, systematic seem, then, that even

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The Emic and Etic Viewpoint Applied

Therefore, we can now understand what Pike meant when he specified that while the "etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system," the "emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system" (1967: 37). Roughly, then, emic is to the inside as etic is to the outside. An important clarification, however, is that the emic perspective is not simply to be equated with the insider's own viewpoint; for, in the case of language, language users are extremely proficient at speaking their language, at making this or that sound distinct from other sounds, but they are often hardly interested in *studying it*. By even attempting to *reproduce*, rather than simply *produce*, a sound faithfully, the linguist has already acknowledged that she or he is a student of the language under study and is not to be confused with a speaker of the language. Even if the linguist is a native speaker of the language, there is a difference between simply using a language, on the one hand, and discussing, systematizing, and comparing those uses, on the other. It would seem, then, that even insiders can become outsiders.

The emic perspective, then, is the outsider's attempt to produce as faithfully as possible—in a word, to describe—the informant's own descriptions or production of sounds, behavior, beliefs, etc. The etic perspective is the observer's subsequent attempt to take the descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare—in a word, *re-describe*—that information in terms of a system of their own making—the International Phonetic Alphabet for example. This theoretical system proposed by the student is therefore the basis for comparison and analysis when she or he studies other languages, cultures, societies, religions, etc. For example, one might ask, "Does this language have sounds that can be represented by the 3?" Or, "Does this society have an aspect which can be analyzed in terms of the economic category of class, and then compared to other societies which also have classes?" If, for instance, one were interested in determining the history of a spoken language, entailing the identification of the family of which it is a member (e.g., "Does Italian share anything in common with French, and how are they both related to German, Latin, or Sanskrit?"), such etic, comparative study would be crucial. If, however, one wished simply to learn the language for oneself, or only to describe customs as accurately as possible, there may be no such need to develop the comparative basis afforded by the etic perspective.

Which Perspective is Authoritative?

What is of particular interest is the degree to which a researcher emphasizes either of these two perspectives. Which viewpoint is to be authorized? Is etic scholarship to be judged by the informant? (For example, one might dispute

that the *s* can be represented in terms of so many different Phonetic Alphabet characters, for an *s* is simply an *s*.) Is the informant to be judged by the comparative conclusions reached by the observer? (For example, a researcher might conclude that language X is simplistic when compared to language Y.) Does scholarship operate apart from the concerns of insiders or is it intimately connected to their lives? Is the goal of scholarship on human behavior, beliefs, and institutions to have the people whom we are studying agree with our conclusions and generalizations? Or, is it instead the goal of developing logical, scientific theories on why it is that humans do this or that in the first place, regardless of what they think? To whom do scholars of human behavior answer?

The Canadian scholar of the study of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, is widely known for authorizing the religious insider when it comes to judging the quality of scholarship. Cantwell Smith stated quite unequivocally that no statement made by the scholar of religion is valid unless the religious believer could accept it as correct. If this rule were to be accepted, then insiders become the final authority in determining what is and what is not a correct statement about their religion. Perhaps such a rule has some value in ensuring that the scholarly description of the insider's behavior and claims is accurate but does such a rule apply when the researcher is attempting to determine just why it is that one insider acts this way and another acts that way? Or what of the case where the researcher finds an intriguing gap between the insider's claims and their behavior? Could not the insider be acting for reasons of which they are not completely aware? Should not the study of human behavior be clearly based on criteria outside those of the actors themselves?

These are precisely the concerns of a well-known anthropologist, Marvin Harris (1979). He has argued that the goal of scholarship on human behaviors is not to determine what the insider might mean by their beliefs or actions but, instead, to discern explanations for why it is that they do or think what they do. Accordingly, Harris critiques Pike for authorizing the emic at the expense of the etic. According to Harris, Pike maintains that although scholarship necessarily starts with etic categories and theories it should attempt to shake off the inevitably insufficient outsider categories in favor of the proper insider understandings. Instead of attempting to determine (and thereby authorize) the insider's beliefs, Harris is interested in studying the material (e.g., political or economic) causes behind human behaviors and beliefs. Therefore, he critiques the "emic bias" in Pike's work for, in Harris's opinion, such a bias prevents comparative, analytic study where no insider claims are privileged. According to Harris, our goal as scholars is not simply to report and repeat what our informants tell us, for that makes us simply passive documenters of indigenous claims. Instead, and contrary to such scholars as Pike and Cantwell Smith, Harris argues that although research on human institutions and beliefs begins with descriptive information, the overall goal is to develop a generalized theory

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of one's own making and testing that can be used to elucidate all sorts of human behaviors. After all, in developing a theory of religion in general, no one religious viewpoint could come to dominate for we are not attempting to develop a Christian theory of religion, a Hindu theory of religion, or a Buddhist theory of religion. Instead, we are seeking criteria from outside each of these particular systems so as to compare and then explain them all together. Simply put, for Harris etic or analytic scholarship is not constrained by the way in which the people we study say they act or think. Instead, it is constrained by the rules that comprise rational, comparative, scientific analysis.

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Although this initial survey of the thoughts of Pike and Harris will not settle the issue, it does bring into sharp relief that there is something at stake in addressing and settling the insider/outsider problem. Simply put, the future of the human sciences are at stake for, depending on how one settles the insider/outsider problem, scholars of human behavior could either be seen as observers capable of making novel claims about the causes of human action or as participants making autobiographical claims of no necessary analytic consequence.

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To begin our study, this part opens with what has become a classic (and fun) essay for illustrating some of the perils of the insider/outsider problem. Although Miner's study of the body rituals of the intriguing Nacirema people was first published in the US in 1956, this ethnography (or a descriptive account of people's customs and behaviors) is still one of the most effective means for placing readers in the midst of the difficulties of making claims about "other" people, their motives, feelings, and the value of their cultures. Whereas for some readers, Miner is being descriptively accurate in his remarks on these "exotic" people, to others his tone is consistently condescending and judgmental, while to yet others he is engaged in a complex form of satire, especially the ironic way in which the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski is quoted at its close regarding the "high places of safety in the developed civilization" from which the scholar works. A careful reading of his essay will therefore demonstrate the complex ways in which apparently neutral description often carries with it both interpretation and evaluation, as well as suggest the difficulties of distinguishing a stable "us" from a "them." The moral of this story? The apparently simple task of talking about other people is not as simple as it may at first appear.

Can Sceptic and Believer Understand Each Other?

"In any discussion between sceptics and believers," writes Alasdair MacIntyre in the opening line to his essay, "it is presupposed that, even for us to disagree, it is necessary to understand each other." This often overlooked assumption is precisely what MacIntyre examines in his well-known essay. He is interested not in whether the sceptic and the believer can agree on this or that matter, but whether they can establish a shared basis upon which they would later base such agreements or disagreements. In other words, can they even understand each other?

For anyone either to agree or to disagree with another person, they must first understand just what the person is talking about and what they are claiming. For two people even to be engaged in a conversation of any kind presupposes at least one crucial thing: that they are both talking about the same thing (and in the same language). If they are not, they soon end up talking past one another and, even if they continue to speak, their conversation comes to a bitter end. For instance, if two people were conversing on the role played by religion in human affairs, they would not get very far if for one of them "religion" constituted the revelation of a loving deity and for the other religion was merely a psychological delusion—they are clearly not talking about the same thing. For either to arrive at an understanding of other's position, they must already have understood and appreciated the assumptions and vocabularies of their dialogue partner. This common starting point makes their conversation possible—two people speaking different languages or defining their terms in different ways can hardly converse with one another. For conversation to take place, then, the partners need a degree of commensurability; they need a common measure, a common basis, upon which to build.

What happens, then, when the conversation partners are in fact speaking radically different languages or when their speech involves radically different sets of assumptions and vocabularies? Is understanding possible in this case? This is MacIntyre's question: Can the sceptic understand the believer (or *vice versa*)? For, as MacIntyre portrays them, these two people start with sets of assumptions so different that they are in fact incommensurable—there exists no shared or common system of measure that unites their discourses. It is not so much that the sceptic and the believer are, as the old saying goes, "like apples and oranges," for both of these are fruits, both inevitably share some important aspects and, therefore, they are commensurable. Inasmuch as one believes a loving deity exists (believer) and the other does not (sceptic), the sets of assumptions that ground their conversation are, to MacIntyre, incommensurable. Simply put, a gulf lies between them and because of this they cannot hope to understand each other. The closest they can come is that each understands the claims of the other *but in a completely different way from the other's own self-understanding*. For example, whereas some believers understand their

references to "God" apart from, and not as Freud would have of the believer's own. The implication should be clear: as insiders (and *vice versa*) insider one must be is specifically about believers: according to grasp of the relevant

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references to "God loves me" to refer to a powerful but caring being that exists apart from, and nurtures, the world, the sceptic who had read even only a little Freud would have little choice but to understand such "God-talk" as the result of the believer's own deeply felt insecurities.

The implications for the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion should be clear: according to MacIntyre, outsiders cannot hope to understand insiders (and *vice versa*). To phrase it another way, to truly *understand* an insider one must *become* an insider; to understand is to be. Although his essay is specifically about Christian insiders, it is nonetheless applicable to all believers: according to him, the "sceptic and believer do not share a common grasp of the relevant concepts."

In a later essay we will again return to MacIntyre's provocative argument. Donald Wiebe, a Canadian scholar specializing in the relations (or lack of) between the study of religion and theology, tackles MacIntyre's thesis and suggests that there is much at stake in the way in which the latter understands scholarly research to come about. In other words, Wiebe argues that MacIntyre's understanding of what is involved in *coming to an understanding* requires attention if we are to overcome the great divide the latter sees between insider and outsider.

Or is it All Just a Question of Degree?

But is this divide between insider and outsider as great as MacIntyre presumes? Instead of being limited only to either the insider's or the outsider's viewpoint, we might ask whether there is a mediating position in this debate. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz might provide just such a position. Geertz argues that, instead of seeing the insider and outsider positions as polar opposites, involving an either/or from the researcher, perhaps it is all a question of degree. Using a terminology capable of suggesting the relative, more-or-less nature of one's viewpoint (that of experience-near and experience-distant perspectives), Geertz suggests that we have misunderstood the work of studying other people if we think our only options are either an "ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch" or "an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer." The challenge—or, as Geertz puts it, the trick—is to take the experience-near concepts of our informants and to place them "in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life." Where an informant might talk of "fear," the psychologist might talk of "phobia"—but just what are the relations between these two concepts? Surely fear does not exhaust the notion of phobia, demonstrating that the usefulness of such scholarly categories as "phobia" is, at least in part, to be judged by the degree to which they can be used to distinguish and compare, on one level, the similarities and differences in

the reports and behaviors of the people we study. Therefore, where the scholar strives to compare, interpret, and explain what they think the insider is experiencing, the informant is most often involved simply in experiencing it.

To demonstrate just what is involved with moving from experience-near to experience-distant concepts, Geertz investigates the differing conceptions of "self" or "person" (both of which are experience-distant concepts) that he has studied in three different societies (Java [now Indonesia], Bali, Morocco). Unlike Pike, Geertz does not prioritize the insider's (or experience-near) concepts and experiences. Unlike Harris, Geertz does not aim to provide an explanation of their experiences and behaviors. Unlike MacIntyre, Geertz does not presume that the starting points of insiders and outsiders are incommensurable. Instead, by means of admittedly comparative, experience-distant categories, he aims simply to interpret and understand what it is that someone might mean when they say or do this or that.

Although this opening part ends with Geertz's intermediate position, this should not suggest that this position wins the day. It will be left to readers, as they work their way through the following parts, to make their own decisions as to the relative merits of the various positions scholars take to solve the insider/outsider problem.

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