

# **Merits and Demerits of 'Insider' and 'Outsider' Perspectives in the Study of Religions**

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The gap between the insider and outsider visions of a religion has been a permanent topic of discussion in the last three decades, and interrelate the most important schools of thought within the Study of Religions. The dichotomy can be addressed as follows: How contextualized and knowledgeable is an insider of a certain religion—whether he or she is a priest, a cleric, a proselyte, a faithful or a theologian—to depict the quintessence of that religious teaching, and the dogma, the ritual, and the institutional system that lies underneath without being considered a kind of spokesperson? Secondly, how informed is an outsider of a certain religion—whether he or she is a follower of another religion, a scholar, or an atheist—to portray the embodiment of that religion with objectivity, impartiality, and rationality but at the same time with a sense of familiarity and respect? In this text I will try first to distinguish religion from theology, as part of the aforementioned problem resides in the confusion that exist between the two approaches, approaches that are not absolute but complementary. I will look second to the epistemological question: is there a privileged observer in the access and discussion of religious knowledge?

## **1. From Theology to the Study of Religions: The Centrality of the Insider/Outsider Debate**

Theology has been an important discipline in studies of Western religions and a piece within Christian discourse that was influenced by the Hellenistic model. The term comes from 'theo logia', which in the literal sense means 'talk or reflection on God or Gods' (Tracy, 2005, 9126). So theology is a reflection on the divine and divinity. By religion we mean a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices agreed upon by a number of persons (the devotees). As the intellectual reflection involved takes place in the context of a precise religious tradition, we may speak of the presence of theology in a broad sense. We may also talk of comparative theology as an intellectual interpretation of that tradition that occurs within the framework of religious pluralism, which originates from the religions of the Book and motivate a comparative study of the

different traditions concerned. Theological debates are essentially three questions: a) How does religion address the problems of the human condition? b) What is the way of ultimate transformation that a specific religion offers? c) What is the comprehension of the ultimate reality that a particular religion possesses? (Tracy, 2005).

The academic study of religion has developed into a cross-disciplinary field that has been enriched by the contribution of a great diversity of scholars such as anthropologists, economists, historians, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists. Thus religion can be observed under many perspectives and under many disciplines. As George Chryssides remarks, the development of the study of religion—as an academic subject—originally was inspired by the study of Christianity. From there it moved to other religious traditions as comparative studies were normally undertaken by Christian scholars (Chryssides, 2014, 2). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new interest in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism began to advance through the contact of the West with the Orient through conquest and trade. At the end of the nineteenth century and all along the twentieth century the study of religion developed by adopting a scientific paradigm that existed among social sciences studies and was transferred into the ground of religious comparative studies. The contribution of anthropology, sociology, and psychology was, in this regard, decisive (Chryssides, 2014, 4).

In every discipline that incorporates any approach to religion the roles of believers *versus* the roles of observers is a subject of intense discussion. This dialogue is usually because of Pike's (1967) and McCutcheon's (1999) major contributions, sited in terms of 'emic' and 'etic' analysis, nouns that derive from 'phonemic' and 'phonetic'. The former refers to any unit of significant sound in a specific language; the latter alludes to a system of cross-cultural notations that represent these vocal sounds (McCutcheon, 1999). The 'emic' approach is the outsider's effort to produce as faithfully as possible the informant description or productions of sound, behaviour, and beliefs. The 'etic' approach is the observer's attempt to take the descriptive information and to organize, systematize, and compare that information in a system of their own making (McCutcheon, 1999). So paraphrasing Pike, quoted by McCutcheon (1999), 'the emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system' and 'the etic viewpoint studies behaviour as from the outside of a particular system'.

People from inside the religious ground like Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade advance strong arguments in favour of the 'emic' perspective claiming that only those who understand religion by practising it have authority to study and discuss it. Under their point of view, those who study from the outside are tempted by reductionism, that is to restrict the study of a specific religion to what they guess to be relevant and marginalizing what they think is negligible. Their argument has apparent connections to Ernts Troelsch's vision that is impossible to assess the relative value of a religion through objective or neutral criteria that are independent of the diversity of particular cultural and religious values (Tracy, 2005, 9129). Also echoing Knott, many religious people have sought to research and write about their own religions as they were observers, with objectivity and critical distance (Knot, 2010, 267).

The 'etic' scholars argue that the 'emic' approach is unfeasible for any researcher who is not a follower of a distinct belief system and that such an approach is a disguise to promote a peculiar commitment to a religion under the mask of academic scholar. Wiebe (1984) argues that the only realistic methodological stance for the scholar of religion is an atheistic one. Ninian Smart argues that only methodological agnosticism is the appropriate approach to look towards the issue of religion and that 'the scholar of religion should treat the objects of religious experience and beliefs as factors independently of whether they exist or are true' (Pembroke, 2011; Smart, 1983, 183). In Smart's words is not necessary to take a decision whether Allah actually revealed the truth to Muhammad to observe Muhammad's inner conviction and that this took place and resulted in a movement that changed the history of humankind. Therefore reductionism is the only reliable approach for an outsider that can bring to the study of religion a combination of insights taken from economics, politics, sociology, and psychology.

Thinking about other people's beliefs as well as their own raises many critical questions such as: Can we fully understand someone else's experience? Is there a substantive difference between an account of a religion by an insider and an outsider? Does translation from one language to another bridges a gap or creates a barrier between the one that reports a story (the worshiper) and the one that reads it? Are there limits to objectivity and subjectivity? (Knott, 2010, 25). The contemporary contribution to the insider/outsider debate focused on the limits and desirability of the

*phenomenological* approach to religion under the allegation that this standpoint was implicitly theological. By phenomenology we mean the attempt through informed empathy to present others' experience and beliefs from their point of view and involving the suspension of one's values (Allen, 2010, 214). The critics of this perspective have questioned the rhetoric of impartiality and critical distance usually invoked by phenomenologists arguing that their assumption of an essential, fundamental and totalizing nature of the sacred and the adoption of Christian categories and types to theorize about other religions is misleading (Knott, 2010, 26). According with another view the belief that the outsider is in a more desirable position to scrutiny a religion is a value judgement arising out a particular worldview. Not to have experienced and grasped the faiths from inside is like 'having a hole in the centre of one's understanding' (Partridge, 2000). The criticism is somehow stagey as phenomenologists look to uphold diversity and pluralism and contend that religion reveals many dimensions of human experience, which requires the scholar of religion to take seriously the context of diverse religious phenomena.

What are the basic advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider insight in the study of a specific religion?

The insider has a better knowledge of dogma, rites, and tradition as he or she was raised in 'that particular' tradition. He or she acknowledges the language of communication and the symbols through which the religion is lectured to worshippers without major effort. In the religions of the Book this knowledge is very relevant because doctrine needs to be perceived in context (commentaries of the Bible for Christians, the Talmud for Jews, and the *tafsir* and *hadiths* for Muslims). In the non-theist religions (like Buddhism and Hinduism) this comprehension is crucial because these religions are required to be understood in their cultural and ethnical roots. The major disadvantages come from the proximity of the 'insider' scholar to the institutional structure of a specific religion (the clergy, the rabbinate, the canonry, the *mullah*, the *archakas*). This proximity may obscure his or her objectivity and impartiality. In the most extreme situations in the initiatic religions he or she may be tempted to disguise or even adulterate the description of the faith and the rituals for fear of betraying the secrets of initiation.

The outsider has the foremost distance and objectivity of analysis, which free him or her to accurately describe the nature, purport, and rituals of a specific religion. He or she has profound awareness of methodological tools of analysis and is less vulnerable than the insider, as he or she does not need to report to religious authorities the outcome of his or her research or wait their approval. The major disadvantages of outsider insight come from exaggerated objectivity of the analysis that can be supposed as cold, distant, and circumstantial. At the same time the scholar's analysis may reveal his or her prejudgments or misconceptions of a religion that is reputedly a rival of his or her own. Nevertheless, understanding other people's beliefs depends on the human capacity for self-indulgence, A person can be himself and at the same time understand the life and principles of another person. The outsiders that developed field research by residing for a while in the interior of a religious community may confront difficulties caused by unwillingness of the clergy (or congregational authorities) to reveal concealed aspects of the doctrine and ritual. In the case of religions that are deeply rooted in ancient ethnic-oriented sacred texts, ignorance of the language in which the texts were written may be a factor of depreciation of the quality of the research.

## **2. New Approaches to the Study of Religions**

Two new approaches have emerged in the West during the last three decades. One is secular and scientific and the other is focused on reflexivity. The first is held by Segal (1983), Wiebe (1984), and McCutcheon (as cited in Knott, 2010, 261) and is aligned with an objective stance on religious subjects. According to these views we cannot adopt as certain a common human nature across categories like religion, as experience about the sacred may be shared. The purpose of the scholar is not to get inside the experience and significance of the religious experiment, but to rely on the advantages of critical distance to make a religion understandable for readers from an outside perspective.

The second is pursued by Brown (2002), Hufford (1995), King (1995), and Flood (1999) (as cited in Knott, 2010), which advises that rather than objectivity and distance, the study of religion requires broad awareness of the scholar about the dialogical nature of the research. Reflexivity means critical self-reflection on academic methods and theories (Hinnelis, 2010, 590). Researchers need to take into consideration the context and standpoint from which they develop their research, which is a prerequisite of their

intellectual honesty and consciousness. Chryssides (2014) notes it is important that the researcher does not confuse academic study with his or her own spiritual quest. While the spiritual journey of the scholar may help generate greater enthusiasm, there can be a temptation to confine one's studies to aspects that the believer finds spiritually helpful (Chryssides, 2014, 83). Reflexology research raises the question of whether researchers need to reveal their stance in their written accounts. This may be advisable, as it requires the insider or outsider to clarify his or her standpoint, displaying to readers and critics the frame of reference of his or her conclusions.

There is a final difficulty. Most twentieth-century studies of religion were rooted in the discourse of secular reason and scientific enquiry. Outsiders and insiders aim to articulate their stances in these terms and this led to a sense of tension between being objective and being true to his or her values positioning. That is why an author like Collins aims to offer a postmodern response to these difficulties by recommending leaving the insider/outsider dichotomy in favour of a more dynamic view in which everyone is a co-participant in the formulation of the narrative about religion. Knott (2010) is somewhat a critic of this stance as he, correctly, observes that all interlocutors, whether secularists, devotees, or those who move between these two positions are 'actors within a single-power field'. They have defined, constituted, and criticized religion in general, particular religions and their beliefs and practices, and the secular domain beyond religion (p. 270).

### **3. Conclusion**

The scholars discussed in this paper have shown us the centrality of the insider/outsider debate in the study of religions and put us on guard against the prejudices that may emerge from a proselyte stance within a religious standpoint or other competitive religious standpoints. There is no absolute and definitive merit about one position or the other; both contribute to the comprehension of the nature and complexities of religions and the sacred in this day and age. This discussion may also be anchored in a misconception. As Katie Ashton argues to look at religion as an isolated problem that we can only be inside or outside implies that we are doing religion all the time and may even fail to recognize the diverse identities we hold. Gender or class may interfere with other aspects of the insider/outsider status. The problem may be

addressed in terms of an epistemological question how we can know and attend the knowledge of the other person (Aston, 2012).

In my view, the outsider is more prepared to challenge the embedded 'truths' disguised underneath any religious dogma and clergy, and give a more realistic insight of what a religion, congregation or sect really is—if he or she assumes a careful position and prevents him- or herself from discussing the truthfulness and authenticity of that specific religion. He or she has objectivity and comparative impartiality of analysis that the insider misses and in methodological terms is more equipped to apply them to the subject observed.

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