



George D. Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg (eds): *The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religions*. Equinox, 2019. 421 pages.

The insider/outsider debate in the study of religions has traditionally referred to the role of the researcher. From the researcher's outsider perspective being the ideal to the insider view over time being increasingly privileged, the notion of insider/outsider perspectives is today thoroughly questioned. Furthermore, this is a debate that no longer concerns only the researcher's role, but just as much those being researched: who is an insider, and who is an outsider, in terms of religious identity? That the insider/outsider question has not been resolved, but that there is a need for new approaches, is made clear through the varied contributions to George D. Chryssides' and Stephen E. Gregg's edited volume *The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religions*.

In the volume's preface the editors mention that they were surprised by the number of proposals their call for contributions inspired. The number no doubt underlines the currency of the topic. *The Insider/Outsider Debate* thus clearly fills a scholarly need, while not offering any simple and readymade answers – or opening up many possible ways forward.

The volume includes twenty chapters divided into two sections, the first focusing on new methodological approaches, the second on contested identities. Although the

placement of some of the chapters can seem a little random given that they deal with both questions of methodology and identities, the division further underscores the richness of the volume. In the following I will highlight the chapters I find most noteworthy. This approach will allow me to dig a little more deeply into the many interesting perspectives on offer, though some of the volume's richness will thus unfortunately be ignored.

The editors begin the volume by offering an insightful introduction to the insider/outsider debate and the challenges studies of everyday and lived religion have introduced, especially in how both the researcher and researched and outsider and insider can be comprehended. One question that opens up the debate well is what is meant by belonging to a religious tradition. Does belonging entail official membership, following certain creeds, personal identification, or adhering to family traditions? And who does not belong? The one who has left, been excluded, lost interest, or moved along without cutting official ties – if official ties that one can cut even exist? To counter this uncertainty, the writers offer a relational framework for understanding religious identity, in which 'religious identity is performed in the negotiation of everyday etiquette' (22). The background of a person and the relations of which one is part will shape one's religious identity, often making concepts such as Christian, Muslim, or Jew too simple.

The volume's second instalment,

written by Steven J. Sutcliffe, brings the reader back to the discussion of the emic and etic. Sutcliffe underscores that the emic/etic distinction has often been misunderstood, and that it would be useful to revisit this discussion. The important thing to ask, according to Sutcliffe, is not who constructs the object of knowledge, but how it is constructed, and here the emic/etic divide may still prove useful. The emic/etic perspective concerns more than questions of outsider and insider, but it brings important insights to the debate and highlights that previous discussions may well be worth revisiting.

In Chapter 5, building on feminist theoretical and conceptual frameworks, Nina Hoel offers some methodological tools that take the body and relationalities seriously. Hoel argues that when the scholar takes the body and relationalities seriously, attention shifts from 'the content of research to the process of research [...] and from the "object" of research to the interactive modes that constitute and facilitate complex and diverse research relationships' (89). In this situation the insider/outsider binary can be challenged and allow for important perspectives on lived religion. The analytical categories given particular attention are 'feminist standpoint epistemology', 'intersectionality', and 'reflexivity'. More perspectives are certainly to be found, but the chapter offers an important starting point for further reflection.

In Chapter 7 Lynne Scholefield discusses Ken Wilbur and his inte-

gral theory or 'theory of everything'. Scholefield suggests that Wilbur's thinking can be used as a tool in the study of religions to highlight where the research/researcher is situated, and to identify areas and perspectives sometimes missed in their perspectives. According to Scholefield we need a contemplative approach in the study of religions; rationality only takes us so far. Although I am not personally entirely convinced by perspectives that focus on hierarchies as much as Wilbur's thinking, his theory does offer tools that may well be useful in the study of many aspects of religions, as Scholefield amply illustrates with examples related to both 'believing without belonging' and conversion.

Just like the chapters in the first part of the volume, the chapters in the second part offer a plethora of views and experiences. One of this volume's many benefits is its many insights into the experiences of scholars in the study of religions. For anyone working with ethnographical methods the book is bound to offer familiar scenarios and insightful views on the usefulness of what might at one point have felt like fieldwork failures. Steven Jacobs provides an excellent example of this in Chapter 11, in which he describes his brief but insightful encounters with two gurus. The encounters provided important opportunities to reflect on his role as a researcher and insider/outsider perspectives.

In focusing on different traditions and settings, several chapters in the second part of the volume

highlight questions of definition and typology. In Chapter 12 Dan Cohn-Sherbok asks who is a Jew, continuing with a discussion of how Jewish status is understood in different denominations, and ending with an acknowledgement of the need to recognize the subjective character of Jewish existence. In Chapter 15 Claire Miller Skriletz examines the scholarly categorization of Buddhist communities in the United States, highlighting problematic issues related to ethnicity, for example. Beneath the idea of ethnic Buddhist groups is often to be found ideas of these groups being static and slow to change compared to forms of 'American Buddhism' consisting of white Western converts, which are understood to be modern and progressive.

The volume's final three chapters all deal in more detail with how to understand who is an outsider to a community, and what leaving a community can entail. In Chapter 18 Stephen E. Gregg and Aled J. L. Thomas challenge many previous studies of scientology for only focusing on official members. The writers discuss the 'Free Zone' and others who have left the Church of Scientology, highlighting what being a scientologist means to these individuals. In Chapter 19 George D. Chryssides goes on to discuss what leaving a new religious movement can entail. The focus in the media and the anti-cult movement is often on ex-members who have broken with a group, and who share stories of difficult times and being brain-washed by charismatic and exploita-

tive leaders. However, studies show that this is only one perspective, and that leaving these movements is often much less dramatic. What it means to be a member or ex-member is often also far from clear. Carole M. Cusack, in the volume's final chapter, continues down the same track, focusing on new religions and the spiritualities of ex-member communities online. The two case studies she has chosen illustrate quite varied reactions and relations to the groups, highlighting the need to avoid the simplistic generalizing and categorizing of ex-members.

Although I feel this volume would have benefited from a little more editing, a clearer focus in some of the chapters, and more of a dialogue between the contributions, overall this is a thought-provoking volume that may be useful for both younger and older researchers in the study of religions who wish to undertake ethnographic research. Both in the methods and identities discussed and through the personal fieldwork reflections the writers share, the volume provides tools to work with and build on for insightful new scholarship.

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