

D I S K U S

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (www.basr.ac.uk)
ISSN: 0967-8948

Diskus 17.1 (2015), 1-13

Plotting belonging: interrogating insider and outsider status in faith research

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ABSTRACT

Fifteen years ago an outpouring of new academic material asserted the value of being an insider in religious research. Conventional assumptions that linked objectivity with outsider status were challenged. This valuable burst of scholarship worked hard to critique the kind of research that preceded it, where faith or identity was seen to compromise research values, and undermine integrity and rigour. This special edition interrogates the legacy of the shift towards practitioner-research with religious-spiritual-magical-secular communities, particularly, but not only, when research examines broader social, historical and political concerns as well as the processes of faith and belief. It examines some more experiential dynamics of research to consider how the insider/outsider debate plays out from the inside of the research process.

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Introduction

This special edition contains a range of perspectives and experiences on the experiential dimensions of insider/outsider debates. The authors span disciplines, coming from Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology, Anthropology and Research Centres. Research topics covered here span British Witches, Jehovah's Witnesses, Sufism, Hospital Chaplaincy and a range of New Religious Movements. Some of the authors are also practitioners of the faiths they explore. The editors (Aston, Cornish and Joyce)

worked in the same anthropology department, and there is an inevitable anthropological inflection to our research expectations and discussions. However, cross-disciplinary concerns are readily visible, and the contributors share a suspicion that the subject of insider/outsider research may be a red herring, a persistent but unhelpful classification. It distracts from the important things: the quality of research, the critical data collected, and the responsibility we have to our research communities, regardless of our beliefs. The short and reflective contributions to this special edition of *DISKUS* demonstrate from a spectrum of perspectives that what really matters is that we know where and who we are, in relation to what, how and why we research.

As we set out in this introduction, social science research in faith communities has been grappling with the extent to which truth claims and belief should, or should not, be at the centre of scholarly research. A more recent variant of this discussion is the implications of research carried out by believers or practitioners of the faith under scrutiny, and the extent to which this may either undermine or enhance research practices. As this stands in contrast to what has become a normative sense of “methodological atheism”, many debates about insider/outsider status raise anxieties about research design and methods (McCutcheon 1999; Arweck & Stringer 2002; Knott 2010; Bell & Taylor 2014). This special edition takes a different starting point: that of research *experience* rather than design or methodology. It emerged out of a successful roundtable we convened at the BASR Annual Conference in 2014. The conference theme concerned the “cutting edge” in Religious Studies. So a little anxiously we proposed a discussion on the “insider/outsider debate” aware that some would question how such a longstanding debate might still be considered “cutting edge”? We suggested that it remains at the forefront of our research as one of the most vexing questions researchers face in the field and even amongst their colleagues. In fact, this roundtable was conceived because it continues to be a formative part of our own research experience. Although working in vastly different research settings – with British Witches, Polish Catholics and Eastern Rite Christians and in the London based Secular and Humanist communities – the questions we faced from our research participants and colleagues were strikingly uniform. When it came to studying religion it seemed that being a member, or not, still mattered to practitioners and academics alike. So the decision to grapple with this question was not totally our own. With this in mind we have placed the emphasis in this special edition on research experience rather than research design. What we hope to untangle is why, no matter how firmly scholars dealing with religion close the debate, the need to align ourselves within a spectrum of perspectives - based on the idea that there exists a contrasting set of insider and outsider relationships – remains so appealing to researchers and practitioners alike.

In order to contextualise these questions and contributions, this introduction covers three interconnected points. Firstly, we set out some of the historical dimensions of the insider/outsider debate as it emerged from theoretical concerns about researching religious practices. Secondly, we explore how discussions about insider status are intrinsically linked to the emergence of a more subjective, nuanced and experiential social science of religion. Thirdly we show, through the contributions in this issue, that relocating the

discussions away from research design and towards research experience helps develop a more rigorous reflexivity across social science disciplines and helps trace the ways in which insider and outsider status is neither simple or fixed, and must be continually examined as part of a dynamic research process.

Grappling with the insider/outsider question

The current interest in the insider/outsider debate in religious fields owes much to mid-1980s Sikh studies (Knott 2010). However this demonstrated a return to a debate that, in one form or another, had haunted the study of religion for many years. We do not suggest there has been a singular, teleological force from objectivity to subjectivity, but rather we trace some of the shifting debates that have bubbled around the contentious subject of insider/outsider status. Over the last thirty years, traditional research processes have been challenged, and it is no longer assumed that primary goals offer an idealised objective account or the viability of religious truth claims (both goals are highlighted by the anthropologist Lett's polemical arguments; see Lett 1997). In this volume, we show how sociologists, religious studies scholars, theologians and anthropologists today are more likely to demonstrate a concern with the dynamics of subjectivity, experience and representation rather than head-on confrontation with religious truth claims. It is these more fine grain accounts that interrogate interpersonal relationships and the specific experiences of researchers navigating the nuanced territory of research practice and belief that concern us here.

Ninian Smart identifies a pivotal point in the 1960s that initiates many of the current debates, while demonstrating how it draws from a much older literature (1999, ix). These roots are found in the work of some of the key intellectual European figures at the turn of the century: William James, Max Weber, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Max Müller. These thinkers radically abandoned the previously reverent attitude of theologians in favour of a new scientific approach to the study of religion (Knott 2010), exemplified perhaps by Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (Müller 1882) where desirable knowledge was seen as objective, neutral and value-free. The insider/outsider debate begins with this newly objective approach to the study of religion as an integral factor in a rationalist and functional social science. Objectivity in social research was entangled with the Enlightenment division of reason and passions, while science was the quest for truth, religion was just so much magical thinking (see Morris 1987, chapter 2). Researchers were expected to be outsiders, or at least to leave their personal beliefs aside before embarking on the study of religion (cf Weber 1946). Or, as E.E. Evans-Pritchard argued in his critical reflections on the trajectory of theoretical approaches to religion: "[Primitive religious] beliefs are for [the anthropologist] sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological" (1965, 17). For Evans-Pritchard, a clearly identified research design sufficed, and the beliefs of the researcher were

irrelevant to the ability to approach the subject from an apparently dispassionate and neutral basis.

Ultimately an objective scientific stance privileged and elevated one very particular view; a white, male, intellectual and secularist interpretation. The scientific approach to religion implied that a researcher from outside the community had a more “truthful” understanding of the religious community in question and therefore could represent it in his work, even if this contradicted emic understandings. Inevitably, claims to objectivity and rationalism did not mean researchers came to their subjects with a value free attitude, which provides scope for questions about the relationship between researchers and their personal faith. As Matthew Engelke points out (2002), there are moments when Evans-Pritchard’s anthropological enquiries take on a theological tinge, at odds with his claims about neutral objectivity (Engelke 2002, 5). Evans-Pritchard demonstrates precisely the kind of assumptions and slippage that have underpinned the insider/outsider debate:

If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can truly be grasped only from within. But beyond a doubt, this can be better done by one in whose inward consciousness an experience of religion plays a part. There is but too much danger that the other [non-believer] will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition (1965, 121; cited in Engelke 2002, 6)

Similar perspectives were later echoed by Turner who posited that greater insights and understanding will be reached if the researcher has a faith perspective, not that they necessarily need to be a member of the group they study (Turner 1992). What both of these discussions offer is a foundation for a research practice that acknowledges the position of the researcher, a shift from Evans-Pritchard’s earlier contention about sociological facts. However, the recognition that the researcher’s personal stance on religion will have a bearing on research is not quite the same as the claim that an insider perspective will (or will not) provide a particularly privileged perspective.

In the 1980s many of the challenges to supposedly neutral, scientific, outsider model came to a head. The turn to a practitioner-researcher model across Religious Studies addressed common concerns and compounded common assumptions, identified as three interrelated parts: access, experience and representation. Perhaps the most apparently thorny ethical issue concerned access. Questions posed by researchers included: How can we research events and material cultures only the faithful are permitted to witness? (Cannell 2007). It is ethically dubious to lie to gain admission or to insist on gaining entrance as an outsider? (Luhmann 1989). And do accounts that skirt these issues risk becoming partial? (Cannell 2005; Lindsquist & Coleman 2008). Researchers also asked whether outsiders can really understand religious experience in the same way as an acolyte, while scholars questioned the extent to which this might matter (Turner 1992). The third concern, representation, questions the politics of research where the terms of the

debate are set by outsiders whose representations of a given faith were ascribed a higher level of “accuracy” than that of practitioners.

One of the implicit outcomes of the turn to practitioner research was that belief became synonymous with religion. But as Day (2011), among others, has pointed out affiliation does not always beget belief. Religion is as much a social category as an ontological perspective. One of the more pernicious effects of the manner in which religion and belief were collapsed as a single category was that researchers took for granted that questions of belief should form the core of their work. For those of us interested in the more social aspect of religion (Joyce’s work uses religion to discuss the process of bordering in Europe, see Joyce 2014) it seemed impossible to escape the insistence that we hold a position on the place of belief.

Phenomenological approaches had appeared to offer a solution to the insider/outside issue, as well as provide a new challenge to belief based assumptions. The dominant legacy phenomenology left for religious researchers was a keen sense of methodological agnosticism as a way of repositioning research away from belief towards meaning and experience, regardless of the personal belief of the researcher. It provided the space for outsiders to utilise empathy and imagination to carry out research within religious groups. Scholars of religion have utilised a phenomenological approach since at least the 1930s. In 1933 van der Leeuw published *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, in which he expressed the belief that his method allowed the researcher to be objective while gaining deep comprehension of intentions and meanings (Van der Leeuw 2014 [1933], 677-8). Van der Leeuw asked scholars of religion to interpolate religious phenomena into their own lives, to take on feelings and emotions. However, it was his belief that researchers could ultimately suspend their own value judgements and attend to the structural elements of a given religion, thus coming to an empathetic *verstehen* (1933). At the heart of van der Leeuw’s work was the desire to set aside any theological assessment of religious experience, and instead to try to understand the experience in itself, and such phenomenological themes remain key to more contemporary researchers (for example: Eliade 1963; Smart 1973). While a valuable perspective, despite claims to the contrary, it continued to focus on questions of belief – in this case the extraordinary experience of believing - and by default curtailed the possibility of researching everyday lived religion. The methodological focus on the suspension of value judgements relies on a set of fixed categories and does not encourage a more nuanced processual notion of research.

Since the 1980s Religious Studies scholars increasingly turned to the work of anthropologists, particularly to the method of participant observation. They were also attracted to Geertz’s aims to mediate the experience-near perspective of his research participants with experience-distant conceptual categories (McCutcheon 1999). At this time anthropology was dealing with its own “crisis of representation” (Foucault 1972), building on emergent feminist critiques (for example, Ardener 1975). Calls for a more reflexive anthropology, that took time to interrogate its limitations and the politics underneath its claims to objectivity are most readily recognised through the publication of

Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus 1986). This work presented anthropologists with the stark criticism that traditional ethnographies had represented “the other” only through the eyes of the anthropologist and in so doing had glossed over political and historical complexities, the impact of colonialism and gender, class and race differences. Its publication, along with the work of Edward Said (1978) and post-colonial critiques more generally, had an impact on debates about the politics of representations. While Clifford and Marcus did not directly address methodological questions per se – focusing mainly on textuality – it did alert scholars to positionality and the construction of “objective” accounts. This kind of intellectual critique has had a bearing on the shape of ethnographic research around religious communities. Of note here is Crapanzano’s portrait of the Moroccan tile maker, Tuhami, who believes he is married to spirit (1985). Crapanzano does not account for Tuhami’s relationship as an objective truth or as a mistaken belief, but instead, through a self-conscious writing process, demonstrates the role the daemon marriage plays in Tuhami’s estrangement from his community. Local religious practices seek to include him even while his specific behaviours make him a pariah. However, Crapanzano constantly positions himself in his account and reminds the reader of how his presence shaped events, enabling the reader to critically assess the shared nature of knowledge production. As the accounts in this special edition demonstrate, questions of positionality span multidisciplinary approaches to reflexive research experiences.

For Religious Studies scholars, adopting a reflexive approach meant adopting a dialogical approach. As Kim Knott has explained, this goes some way to dismantling the insider/outsider dichotomy by positing that all parties involved in research are contributing to the work (2010). Or as Collins says, anyone who participates in any way with a faith becomes part of the narrative, thus problematizing the possibility of outsider research (2002). In this way researchers, practitioners, academic colleagues, academic and clerical institutions, etc. all contribute to a dialogue that eventually produces new knowledge. No one in this situation is clearly inside or outside the research. The reflexive approach also implies that the insider/outsider dichotomy does not work precisely because there are no stable categories. Instead groups constantly form and reform, and people move in and out of religious communities. The dialogical approach must take into account the possibility that those we work with might not agree with our interpretations and raises questions about power and integrity in negotiating dialogues between researchers and participants.

In contrast to the experience of the editors, much of the history of this debate implies that researchers do not hold religious beliefs. On this basis, contested spaces concern questions of reflexivity or subjectivity, and the extent to which research communities can contribute to analyses. This would seem to ignore the gradations of the insider/outsider debate altogether in the efforts to draw attention to a broadly reflexive research. However, out of new challenging methodological discussions, the 1990s saw the staking of new research territories that not only justified, but privileged the perspective of the practitioner-researcher (McCutcheon 1999; Arweck & Stringer 2002; Knott 2005). This is less to do with “getting inside” someone else’s skin

(McCutcheon 1999), and more to do with negotiating a position of faith with research questions, practice and experience in relation to the researchers own values and agendas.

The red herring?

We have called the current status of the debate about the peculiarities of the insider/outsider debate a “red herring” for a number of reasons. The debate obfuscates and distracts from privileging nuanced and reflexive research, and as a result presents a polarised and fixed research territory. It acts as a red herring for researchers who are *and* are not practitioners, when discussing the pros and cons of their positions. As Narayan explores when discussing the dynamics of native anthropology in the 1990s, being a researcher sets insiders apart from other insiders (1993), a point later developed by McCutcheon in his reflections on the progress of this debate (2003).

These debates have been thrashed out and appear to have settled to some degree – despite the ongoing deconstruction and reflection on research relationships. Yet it remains an important dimension of the lived experience of research. As we suggested in the roundtable that preceded this special edition, in our day-to-day research the debate doesn't feel particularly resolved. Informal conversations between Aston, Cornish and Joyce while working in the same anthropology department showed that although working in varied field sites (Joyce works in Poland with two different Christian confessions, Cornish has been working with British Witches, and Aston works with secularists and humanists in London) we encountered similar expectations and assumptions. Despite the prominence of the insider/outsider debate, and its various twists and turns, we frequently faced the inference that we were practitioner researchers from our participants as well as other scholars.

Despite the largely rationalist history of this discussion across disciplines, it seems to be taken for granted that those who work with religious communities are more likely to be practitioners. This particularly seems to be the case when research participants are not globally or politically marginalised, but are media savvy and educated, and are predominately located in Euro-American territories. Anthropologists meet the subject of practitioner research in a slightly different, but familiar guise. For example, while it might be assumed that someone studying Latin American citizenship is not required to be a Bolivian peasant, those exploring the Occupy movement are expected to identify as activists. This may reveal an underlying anxiety that those who study religious groups may be covert religious activists unless they explicitly declare their allegiances, combined with deep rooted concerns that practitioner-researchers may not carry out rigorous research (a point disputed by many, see for example, the essays collected in Arweck & Stringer 2002). Outside of anthropology we found this suspicion is equally strong among cross-disciplinary academics and religious practitioners.

The tensions around insider/outsider research reflect our anxieties about how we speak on behalf of others, in and outside academia, and some of these questions and concerns hinge on the extent to which research groups already speak for themselves, with clear and public voices. Certainly a shift in focus to research “at home” begs the question “for whom do we speak”. Since participants “at home” are often able to articulate their own concerns and practices in public, as peers, the researcher cannot speak *for* research participants (Cornish 2005, and see Cornish this volume). All the papers in this volume document research carried out with groups who have loud voices in the public domain, even when they might consider themselves marginalised in a number of ways. As van Eck Duymaer van Twiststates, INFORM provides necessary support to marginalised groups or individuals, while Jehovah’s Witnesses, British Witches, Chaplains, Sufis and Humanists can and do speak for themselves. Anxieties about speaking on behalf of “others” is perhaps a general issue in anthropology, but it has particular relevance in the study of religion. In part this is due to the underlying secularity of the social sciences, meaning the religious subject is always assumed to be “other”. Yet, as anthropologists begin to examine religion closer to home, new anxieties are raised; incorporation is always an “embarrassing possibility” (Ewing 1994, 571) and the “other” becomes the “*repugnant* other” (Harding, 1991).

At the roundtable, Timol (who unfortunately was not able to contribute to this volume) described how the experience of carefully negotiating the space above his research relationships, personal convictions, and theoretical strategies could be conceived of as a “methodological tightrope” (Timol 2014). This provides us with a useful metaphor to consider how we and the contributors have approached our encounters with the insider/outsider debate. This is not (obviously) the first time this debate has been approached in a way that seeks to destabilise apparently clear boundaries between insider and outsider status. However, our suggestion differs in one crucial way, researchers such as Sambur suggested that their aim was a reconciliation between the insider and outsider view (Sambur 2002, 31). What our contributions show is that these categories are not stable enough to offer a reconciliation, but instead we can trace the shifting insider and outsider allegiances in which we find ourselves.

Contributions and roundtable: inside and outside the debate

This special edition explores the insider/outsider debate at the heart of our research. Our roundtable demonstrated that these questions remain pertinent for new and experienced researchers alike, as scholars continually keep a weather eye on their relative positions. The panel contributors covered a diverse range of research experiences, subjects, and perspectives, but were all ultimately concerned that an exclusive focus on the debate belies an intricate web of anxieties about the position, intention, and capacity of the researcher and the validity of their work. It clouds a range of questions that are integral to the continuing and reflective development of our research. Across the different discussions it was evident that the insider/outsider question had become a code for a set of related and complex questions about

the relationship between multiple stake-holders, researchers, institutions and participants. Some of the contributions in this special edition take the fieldwork experience as the starting point to consider the reflective ways in which researchers negotiate their status in relation to research participants, and the different ways in which they might be simultaneously be considered insiders or outsiders (see Cornish, Randall this volume). Others are more concerned with how their perceptions on insider and outsider status might intersect with the impact of their research beyond their immediate academic interests (see Bryant, Chryssides in this volume). This concern resonates throughout van Eck Duymaer van Twist's analysis of the ways in which these questions of belonging are implicated in a role that combines research with advice and advocacy (this volume). Together, these sketch out a discursive territory around carrying out research amongst religious practitioners today.

While we suggest that research experience, rather than design, is a key factor in reflecting on the dynamics of insider/outsider status, we acknowledge the crucial role of methodologies. Ethnographic fieldwork is at the centre of both Cornish's and Randall's accounts, although their starting points along a spectrum of insider and outsider positions differ, while Bryant's analysis also interrogates her methodological process. Randall initially claims an insider's perspective on Sufism, indeed, takes a Sufi 'thing' as her central analytical focus, using this to explore the proliferation of subjectivities that emerged from the experience of carrying out fieldwork. She concludes that primary insights on her broader research questions continually revolve around the incessant probing of these subjectivities. In contrast, Cornish acknowledges that, despite maintaining an outsider status, the processes of ethnographic fieldwork result in complex webs of relationships that include the shadow cast by previous researchers as well as the development of friendships with participants over time. Bryant's account adds a different dimension to these accounts of research processes, as her thoughts on embarking on postgraduate research revolve around her reflective position *vis-à-vis* theoretical perspectives as a methodological intervention. But, as the contributions reveal, methodology and methodological concerns, are part of the lived research experience.

The effect of research with religious communities remains central across social science and humanities disciplines (Prideaux 2009). As Van Eck Duymaer van Twist explains, working within a research centre, with an emphasis on advocacy work, requires a continual renegotiation of the ways in which stakeholders and clients perceive the organisation. The repercussions of this resonate in real world political matters through policy or legal implications. Chryssides reflects on his own engagement with Jehovah's Witnesses in the dynamic interplay between the kind of information provided by researchers who see themselves as clearly on the outside, and how this is responded to by insiders. His account indicates how even when debates appear to identify firm boundaries between inside and outside knowledge, these categories are, in practice, rather more slippery and tenuous, as the multiplicity of voices stake their claims publically. Comparable tales are found in Cornish's experiences with British Wiccans and Witches whose claims that they were misrepresented by earlier researchers have been fluently

expressed without any help from scholarly researchers. These all indicate the nuanced ways in which researchers and advocates must negotiate the territory around speaking about as well as for participants and clients, as illustrated by the contrasting perspectives between Chryssides', van Eck Duymaer van Twist's and Cornish's contributions.

Similar practical negotiations are visible under the surface of Bryant's tussles with theoretical theological positions, as she investigates the role of practicing health chaplains. Like Bryant, Aston's contribution to the panel explored the question of intersectionality (2014). The insider/outsider dichotomy presumes a fixed personhood which is unrealistic and does not account for personal change. Aston's own experience, with secular humanist groups, highlighted this, especially as she had grown up in a Christian household but was no longer Christian. This placed Aston as an "in-between" or as she called it, as "piggy in the middle" (see also Aston 2012). Aston considered that despite working with nonreligious people, these insider and outsider groups still arise; suggesting this debate rests in some part on our insistence on imagining certain kinds of categories.

All the contributors have found a "third way" in this debate which suits their own research project. Bryant discusses the possibility of finding an interdisciplinary solution to this issues, using both sociology and theology in tandem. She describes how the theological approach can provide insider knowledge and inform the researcher, but can benefit from social scientific methods and both require researcher reflexivity. She suggests a third approach – the "genuine encounter" – which includes multiple stake-holders and the researcher. This suggests that there is no fixed response to this dilemma, but that it should remain a pressing issue in research design. Part of the question about how to best represent the outcomes of research concern the ways in which those being studied have a voice – and this is particularly relevant in these contributions. The voices of those being researched are audible across these accounts.

During the roundtable discussions Joyce observed how much her sense of whether she was inside or outside at any given time was due to the ways in which she was treated or classified by her research participants (2014). Her position was changeable and dependent on what various participants sought to do with her research. It also fluctuated the longer she lived in the village and became more entangled with the status of her key participants. Frequently her acceptance or non-acceptance in various groups seemed to hinge not on her religious background, but on the fact she was an unmarried young woman. Her experience at times matched the local experience, how people constantly moved in and out of different religious groups based on assorted non-religious attributes. Religious affiliation and experience was understood as deeply connected to the idea of the Polish Belarusian borderlands as a pluralistic and "exotic" space within the Polish State. In the end Joyce felt her experience changed not only the way she conducted her research, hopping from position to position as she was let in or excluded, but also her final representation of her participants as people able to negotiate the

contradictions of plurality and repression through the constant making and unmaking of belonging.

A sense of porous boundaries is discussed in this issue when Randall details how as she moved between different denominations during her research she began to sense she was both inside and outside both groups. Similarly van Eck Duymaer van Twist provides space for people on all sides of the New Religious Movement debate to feel honestly portrayed, and working as an advocate/researcher often feels situated between groups. Chryssides suggests that his outsider status continues to make him wary of how practitioners will police boundaries, despite his expertise and long term research trajectory. It is important to recognise that we can no longer assume researchers sit in some kind of distanced and quasi-objective vacuum and that they never did. One of the conclusions of this special edition is the recognition that in-betweenness must be part of the debate.

Concluding remarks

This special edition contributes to a continuing conversation across disciplinary boundaries about the nuanced processes of carrying out research amongst faith communities. We reflect on the ways in which claims about insider and outsider status are felt as well as seen to matter. We show how a continued and reflexive discussion highlights the interwoven and complex sets of relationships at any given point in a dynamic research process will inflect the ways in which we see ourselves as inside or outside according to flexible and shifting criteria, and may be beyond our control.

What these contributions show is how far we have moved beyond either a methodological agnosticism or notion of privileged perspective towards something that straddles a complex set of ideas about where, when and why we might be inside or outside, and how we are identified by those we hang out with. Historically insider/outsider debates pivoted on issues about truth claims; and assumed there were two discrete groups, practitioners and researchers. What we show, however, are tangible examples from researchers which demonstrate that there are no such discrete boundaries but rather an intricate network of research participants.

One of the main motivations for this special issue was our desire to make the processes of research visible. The positioning of the researcher is a vital part of the research design and not mere navel gazing. Research methods do not spring fully formed from books and funding bodies they are developed in the interaction between the ideal and the concrete. Therefore examining the experience of researchers as they find a place for themselves within religious communities is a crucial step toward a broader understanding and contextualisation of the work we do.

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