Can ‘outsiders’ understand a tradition not their own? Assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of insiders and outsiders in interpreting religions.

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Introduction

Where does one go to learn about religion? To gain an understanding of Judaism, ought one turn to the synagogue or the academy? Might one learn more about it from a Jewish person in Israel than in Canada? From a life-long historian of Judaism, or a life-long scholar of Jewish devotional practices? Are any of these resourced-positions privileged when compared to any other in terms of ability to impart understanding? Are each capable of providing interpretations of integrity concerning the given religion? Outsiders to a given religion, can, indeed, understand and interpret a religious tradition not their own, provided that they have a grasp of the “center” of the religion, and understand the meanings of religious phenomena. The most complete body of interpretative work on a religion will come from a body of insiders and outsiders.

What Makes for Insider & Outsider Identity?

When considering the constitution of religious ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ it is salient to realize that, while these are two distinct identities, they are also two recognizable roles in religious interpretation. In a sense, both the sceptic and devotee of a given religion will function in each position:

The student of religion is an outsider with respect to religious belief but an insider with respect to the belief that words, discussion and argument can provide for an understanding of all reality. The opposite, of course, holds for the religious believer.¹

At first it seems that the differing world-views which these positions inhabit would be incommensurable; that they are mutually exclusive with little potential for reconciliation, but what happens when we enliven these “roles” with examples of actual students of and believers in religion? What of the religious scholar who

doesn’t espouse any specific religion, but does acknowledge “the numinous” or “divine” in some sense? Is this scholar’s work likely to be informed by the religiosity of their subject matter or the religiosity within themselves? When the lines are blurred a bit more, what is it that distinguishes insiders from outsiders?

Let us first examine insiders, those who are considered to have “their own terms” which describe their religion from within. What boundaries might we tentatively draw to encircle those inside? Is the most “inside” of the insiders someone who has been born and raised in a given religious tradition and has thus been shaped by it through their life-long development? Can a newly converted believer have the same sense of coming “up from under” a religion? For purposes of discussion, we will identify a religious insider in a wide scope as one who describes themselves as being part of a religious tradition. Specifically, we will consider religious traditions to be comprised of beliefs, practices and behaviors, symbols, doctrines and dogma, culture, collective history, and worldview. This is not to say that someone who identifies with a portion of these aspects will necessarily be religious, but rather, only if they identify themselves as religious because of their resonance with those particular expressions.2

To define religious outsider status is considerably more difficult since it depends on one’s approach to one’s study (whether remaining methodologically agnostic, neutral, or explicitly recognizing their biases) as we will later discuss. For the moment, let us regard religious outsiders simply as anyone attempting to gain insight into a religious tradition not their own. Hence, whether a self-identified Christian is reading a work by Thomas Merton or Hans Kung, they read from an

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2 That is to say, a European growing up in the Republic of Ireland may consider themselves to be part of a Christian or, more specifically Catholic world view, but they will be an insider to that religious tradition only if they consider themselves to be religious because of their participation in that Christian collective history or world view.
insider perspective, whilst the same person reading Malcolm X or Mevlana Rumi reads from an outsider perspective. This begs the question, what about the life-long scholar of religion who has spent forty years reading, studying, and translating Muslim texts in Arabic? Mightn’t they possess a great “sense” of the religious tradition which has been the focus of their life’s work? Martin S. Jaffee echoes this point: “My training as an historian of religion, I claim, provides me surer historical knowledge of Christianity and Islam, and surely more penetrating insight into what is at stake in their vanished forms, than ‘believers’ without comparable training.” One way to care for these less clear-cut cases of religious identity is to consider the insider/outsider identity question to be answered with a continuum, rather than a concrete solution.

Clifford Geertz does this by utilizing the categories experience-near and experience distant. The experience-near concept is “something that someone…might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others.” In contrast, an experience-distant concept is “one that specialists of one sort or another…employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims.” In imagining a continuum, one might place experience-near people in some sort of illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts, and in so doing attempt to grasp not one’s own correspondence with the spirit of the insider, but rather, a sense of what the insider thinks they (reflexively) are all about. Given these conceptions of

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3 A 13th century Sufi poet and mystic.
5 Geertz attributes this formulation to psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut.
7 Ibid, 51.
religious insider and outsider identities, let us examine what might be involved in these entities “understanding” each other’s traditions.

**What Standards of Intelligibility Comprise Understanding?**

Two Viewpoints: Postmodern and Reductionist Approaches to Understanding

Two contrasting views to consider when discerning that which is knowable are those of Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert Segal. Each see insider and outsider understandings to be in some way incommensurable, though MacIntyre’s postmodern perspective argues that any intelligible understanding lies predominately with the believers themselves in their own terms, while Segal’s reductionist approach locates religious truth and significance from without, arguing that the meaning of a religion may conceivably be unknown by the believers themselves. Each sees contingencies in which religious understanding could best be achieved, though through differing standards of intelligibility.

MacIntyre begins by looking at the context in which conversation takes place, emphasizing that in order for processing to occur (resulting in either agreement or disagreement) prerequisite understanding must exist between insider and outsider. His concern is that the sceptic and believer establish enough of a shared basis of understanding in the general sense in order to attempt understanding each other’s *religious* orientation. Identifying two particular limitations to understanding (language and categories used), MacIntyre outlines how the vocabulary and assumptions of each party constantly shape understandings in this sort of interaction. MacIntyre describes one such scenario:

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

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8 I refer to MacIntyre somewhat retroactively as postmodern because he was very much aware of and engaged with the concepts of postmodernism before they garnered the title.
merely a psychological delusion – they are clearly not talking about the same thing.9

For MacIntyre, we are bound not only by the connotations of our linguistic expression, but also by the categories with which we structure our worldviews. He reminds us that “criteria have a history”10 and that in order to maintain intelligibility, one must make the transition from one contextually-specific set of criteria to another. Acknowledging that those interior criteria we discern when examining the insider perspective from without may seem incoherent to us, he argues that if we are to assess said incoherencies we must do it self-consciously from our own standards of perception. In other words, “to truly understand an insider, one must become an insider; to understand is to be.”11

Robert Segal also recognizes the potential for incoherencies as an outsider tries to make sense of a given tradition, though he argues that the potential for gaps in understanding may be just as great for the insider as for the outsider. The issue here, as Segal puts it, is not what the true meaning of the religion is itself, but “whether believers are aware of the true meaning of religion for them.”12 Segal emphasizes embodied religion, arguing that the only interpretable religion is lived religion, to which both believer and non-believer have access. Recognizing the limitations of empathy (and how it cannot exist if a belief seems logically contradictory for a non-believer), Segal frames the aim as one of appreciation. A nonbeliever cannot appreciate the insider position on its own terms, and so tries to link it to their own in a way that still enables them to accept or appreciate the believer’s religion simply as the

10 Ibid, 41.
11 Ibid, 21.
believer’s own. In his view, this attempt serves the cause because without it, the religion of interest would remain all the more alien.

Standards of intelligibility for Segal do not need to be internal because, for him, “believers, like human beings generally, have no automatic, privileged, incorrigible entrée to the true nature of their behavior…their own view may in fact prove the correct one, but not simply because it is their view.”\(^\text{13}\) In this way, no mutual understanding of vocabulary or categories need be reached in order for an outsider to sense the believer’s position. This illustrates two approaches taken in regard to the way we can understand religion; that is, discerning that which binds and enables our perception and interpretation of it as insiders and outsiders, but what is the “it” which we discern? It is important not only to discuss who has “access” to religion in specific ways, but also to ask what know-able, understandable components of religion\(^\text{14}\) exist?

**What Can Be Known?\(^\text{15}\)**

Religion as Living Totality and Parts

In aiming to understand religion in any intelligible way, one deliberates over the plane of reference for interpretation. Two views emerge. The first is a *sui generis* view which considers religions and religious experience\(^\text{16}\) as constituting a unique class of their own, unsuited to analysis in the same way that one might understand the physiological or psychological experience of trauma, for example. A contrasting view taken by the likes of feminist anthropologist, Rosalind Shaw, claims that we are

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\(^{13}\) Ibid, 156.

\(^{14}\) Here we are considering religion as apart from other study-able things, such as sociology, biology, psychology etc.

\(^{15}\) This impetus for this heading comes from Jonathon Smith’s claim in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* that our starting-out point in religious interpretation is our humanity. As we are limited beings, we must perform an initial reduction to categories of the knowable and unknowable.

\(^{16}\) Here I use the singular ‘experience’ rather than plural ‘experiences’ because I wish to examine how we can know the gamut of religious experience with all they entail, not particular, internal instances.
deluding ourselves if we consider religion as a one-of-a-kind, self-caused phenomenon. Instead, she and others suggest that religion can indeed be reduced to such things as culture, politics, and society, and so should be considered on such a plane of reference.

For those who advocate considering a religion as a living totality, or a “working whole,”¹⁷ it is important to understand the existential situation of the religious person, as well as their mode of being in the world.¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, for example, suggests that religions must be taken sui generis because there exists a center of a religion, a given “central conception which informs the entire corpus of myths, rituals and beliefs.”¹⁹ Without grasping the so-called center of a religion, he argues, one cannot hope to put the peripheral portions of it (no matter how deeply grasped) into any sort of helpful illumination which would contribute to greater understanding. Likewise, Rudolf Otto considers this essential center of religion to be the somewhat non-rational sense of the numinous or holiness. In this perspective “there is no religion in which it [the numen] does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name.”²⁰ For Otto and others, there is a certain mysterium unique to religion which requires that it be taken on its own plane of reference; that none other will do. If you make efforts to explain religion in terms of psychology, politics, economics, gender or sociology, you risk “throwing the

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¹⁸ One example given by Mircea Eliade is when a Western historian of religions examines Australian aboriginal religion, and must master their very different understanding of time in order to begin to grasp their basic creation myths and place significance within the tradition.


baby out with the bathwater.” This approach fears you will be left with nothing (or at least not religion) after such reductions have taken place.

Critics of this sui generis approach to the study of religion do not consider there to be anything “distinctively religious” about religion which cannot be analyzed as sociological, economic, anthropological etc. Rosalind Shaw, a feminist writer, holds this view, arguing that taking religion as a universal category on its own unique plane of reference would be like crafting a treatment of the “universal woman.” She urges us to listen to non-Western women, who point out that “their race and their history of colonization make a difference which makes it impossible to talk of a universal ‘women’s nature.’”21 So too, a newly-converted Christian in Thailand might have a nuanced understanding of that which is at the center of their religion in a slightly different fashion than might a life-long Roman Catholic growing up in Poland.

If we assess religious experience on its own place of reference, we run the risk of totalizing the religious experience of others so that we no longer care what believing natives say or think, emphasizing the collective subject over the experiences and outlooks of real persons. So we see that we come to a point of decision about that which is know-able before we even begin interpreting. We must first assess whether religions ought to be understood as living totalities or if their various constituent parts may be or even must be examined in hopes of gaining understanding.

I feel this dialectic is perhaps best answered by Joachim Wach, who articulates that religionswissenschaft, or the study of religions, must be alive; constantly in process in order to do justice to the dynamism of religion. For him “the

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goal…remains to understand and to present as living totalities the religions studied”\textsuperscript{22} but always after they have been illuminated and studied, there remains a desire to consider the individual traditions, beliefs, and practices; “to connect them and to show them together with the spirit of the entire religion, with the basic intention that animates them, and with the creative religious intuition at their source.”\textsuperscript{23} In this view, the best way to understand or capture a religion is by both disclosing the religion on its own plane of reference, and by considering its particular expressions and the constituent parts of those expressions. One can take a religion \textit{sui generis} in order to gain an understanding of the religious nature of a religion, but in order to present and represent the \textit{geist}, or spirit of the religion in its totality, one must also mediate the \textit{sui generis} with assessment of its constituent parts.

Epistemologies of Religious Understanding: Metaphysical or Material?

We’ve examined \textit{what} of religion can be known (the totality of religion or only its constituent parts,) but it is also important to consider \textit{how} religion can be known. Two views predominate: one would be to see it metaphysically (examining religion as it plays into the nature of reality) and the other to view it materially (that is, examining it on the basis of sensory experience.) Discerning the nature of our knowledge about religion is paramount to our conclusion, \textit{fundamental} even, in deciding what \textit{sort} of debate this religious interpretation will answer. Will it be an empirical one, based on intuition and experience of the divine, or a material one, drawing conclusions from embodied faith?

The metaphysical debate would be characterized by a sense that there is some sort of truth of religion esoterically “out there,” and we, as religious interpreters, must


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 85.
attempt to grasp it. This view, held by W.C. Smith among others, emphasizes the importance of religious understanding in understanding religions. To this viewpoint, there is a radical distinction between faith and its expression in tradition which ought to be explicitly recognized. Here, the “faithful” has an advantage in that the essence of religion can be can intuitively known by them, though not necessarily by others. For Smith, the study of religion, metaphysically, is a religious exercise.

Others, such as Donald Wiebe, argue that religion must be understood materially, analyzing the substance that is available for cognitive exploration by us. This line of argument employs Kant’s epistemological mechanism, arguing that “if religion is indeed faith and tradition, then faith can only be known through tradition.”24 In other words, so far as it is available for understanding, the tradition itself will illuminate the reality of religion, so active belief is not necessary for comprehension. For Wiebe, empathic understanding is not a prerequisite for a scholarly understanding of religion; we all are capable of experiencing embodied faith and can process such experience, in order to understand and interpret a religious tradition. Without a prior inner commitment to the truth of the religious substance one attempts to understand, the insider would not be so metaphysically privileged, but rather would be forced to operate on the same material plane as non-believers in any given tradition.

The answer to this debate of how religion can be known is elusive, and it seems fair to say that religion can be known at least in some sense both by those approaching it metaphysically and materially, and I would suggest that perhaps

neither empirical approach is complete enough. One professor, J. Neuser, cleverly describes this fear that:

In the study of religion, accordingly, deep calleth unto deep, the religious intellectuals, laying down the norms and meanings of the world in their words, speak to the intellectuals who describe religions. By definition, the one is deprived of the power of speech, the other of the power of hearing. In the academic study of religions, the dumb address the deaf.\(^{25}\)

Rather than see each as impaired and unable to help each other, though, I feel it is important to recognize that they still possess distinct and potentially complimentary ways of knowing. The dumb and the deaf can perhaps, then, collaborate in silently painting a picture to capture the religious tradition under examination. So we see that the standards for intelligibility in religious understanding include how we see the religious debate – as a metaphysical or material one, what we include in our consideration of things “religious” – religion in totalities or constituent parts, and whether we find religious understanding in a post-modern, particularist approach, or in a more reductive, universalist one. Each of these choices shape the form of the religious content we will interpret.

**Which Theory of Human Cognition, Behavior, and Organization Holds?**

Also shaping our ability to interpret religion is our sense of how human behaviors and beliefs are accessible to both the informant and the researcher seeking religious understanding. As Russell McCutcheon sees it, five views prevail regarding “to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another”\(^{26}\) particularly regarding human accessibility in religious life. Let us examine each view and assess its potential for unlocking the religious world of insiders to those outside in various ways.

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\(^{25}\) Ibid, 267.

Critically Assessed Explanatory/Enigma Theory\textsuperscript{27}

The explanatory theory sees human actions as somewhat enigmatic and takes as a starting point that the desires of the other are opaque to the researcher and sometimes even to the subject \textit{themselves}. Therefore, the gaps of time and space between researcher and subject are bridged by developing special tools to discern the subject’s motives and fears, and to explain predictable, complex patterns of human behavior. It is empirical in that it is based on human knowledge gained through observation, but is problematic because of its method of inquiry in which conclusions are drawn on the basis of repeated observations of particular cases. One weakness is that this sort of empirical inductive logic must leave room for the next case to falsify the theoretical claim, so even if every Masaii woman dances in the forest and it appears she dances to honor fertility, the enigmatic theory must acknowledge that the next woman who dances might do so due to some other motivation – religious or non-religious.

Critically Assessed Reductionist Theory\textsuperscript{28}

Similar to the explanatory model, the reductionist explanation for much of human behavior moves toward an emphasis on observable and predictable regularities in human behavior as a means of learning about it in an objective manner. This embodied form of behavior would be accessible both by informant and researcher; believers and nonbelievers. It is a naturalistic approach in that it assumes that religion is not a special case to be considered on its own plane of reference. For reductionists, religious behavior can be studied in just the same manner as any other sort of human behavior – political, economic, social etc. Inductive and comparative, it begins

\textsuperscript{27} The presupposition of this theory is that, as members of the natural world, human beings are just as prone to patterns of predictable behavior as are animals.

\textsuperscript{28} The reductionist theory’s basic assumption is that the natural world is governed by regularities akin to scientific laws which are observable from the outside.
looking at specific cases and moves toward more general truth claims. One critique of reductionism is that it explains away rather than guarding what is central and sacred to religious systems, though it also manages to comment on areas at which religious interpretation might otherwise come to a standstill because it allows for differing assumptions and truth-claims between informant and researcher.

**Critically Assessed Agnostic/Neutral Screen Theory**

The neutral screen theory of human behavior manifests methodological agnosticism in that it does not pretend that conclusions are certain, but rather acknowledges that if a researcher does not have access to the subject’s world, then the researcher cannot label the insider’s claims as right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy. It emphasizes issues of accurate observation and comparison at the expense of value judgments, aiming for description, not evaluation. The researcher purposely avoids asking questions of truth where no means exist of acquiring empirical evidence to determine that truth (only inquiring as to the “prove-able.”) This theory enables people who hold differing commitments to enter into public debate with each other because it recognizes the limited nature of the assumptions which constitute one’s stand on the existence and nature of God, and thus is considered relatively neutral. This approach is limited in its potential to forge connections between people, the likes of which might be sought in religious dialogue.

**Critically Assessed Empathic/Open Book Theory**

The empathic theory of human cognition, behavior and organization bridges the gaps of time and space between the researcher and subject through nuanced interpretive tools focused on understanding *meanings*. It is phenomenological in that

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29 The presupposition of this theory is that there are only certain things that are objectively know-able, and these (and no others) must be the concern of the researcher.
30 This theory presumes that the study of humans differs from the study of nature in that humans have a spirit, which makes us unpredictable.
it aims for a non-critical, empathic description of human behavior in which the researcher literally *shares* the subject’s feelings and states of mind; re-living their experiences. Once this phenomenological understanding is achieved, hermeneutics must occur followed by the researcher restating the now-translated experiences, behaviors, and claims of the subject in the language and experiences of the observer. It does not, however, recognize the limits of empathy, such as in the aforementioned example of women’s experiences being fundamentally different depending on whether the setting has been colonized or not. The challenge here is in the redescription step, in which something akin to linguistic translation must occur, though one wonders how the translation might be distorted by someone trying desperately to relate, or by one who does not explicitly recognize their own biases at the outset.

**Critically Assessed Reflexive Theory**

From a viewpoint enmeshed in the human situation, the reflexive theory begins by recognizing that all scholarship has an autobiographical aspect in that researchers are bound to bridge the gaps of time and space by generalizing their own personal experiences to those of other human beings in an act of projection. This highly postmodern theory takes a reflexive stance, turning back on the researcher his or her own questions and answers. One limitation of this theory is that there may be concepts which are not transferable between the informant and researcher’s experience, in which case, the meanings would be incommensurable and the attempt to rephrase in one’s own experience too far of a stretch.

We are not required to select just one of these outlooks on that which shapes human cognition, behavior, and organization, but rather should be aware of the

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31 The presupposition of this theory is that, while there is a gap between subject and researcher, the two have much in common in that each are enmeshed in the human situation, and therefore cannot attain neutrality.
complexities involved in each and consider their implications when actually involved in observation or communication between insider and outsider groups. I feel that some aspects of human behavior may very well be equally as accessible to the insider and outsider, whilst others, I feel, may never be fully grasped, or at least not comprehended in a way that makes for adequate re-description in one’s own terms. Being both opaque and transparent to others, the trick is for us to critically discern which behaviors and cognitions are accessible from the outside, and which must be accessed from outside for accurate assessment of the situation to take place. At times it is helpful to take a value-free approach, though in interpersonal exchanges in which each party hopes to gain something in learning about the other, that approach may impair more than it enables. While it is helpful in initial understandings to reduce human behavior into recognizable categories such as political or economic, to observe them and take them as such might obscure the true meaning of these activities as they are actually seen from the inside. Care should be taken to focus on the observable aspects of religion, but also, finally, to capture the spirit of a given religious tradition as expressed by an insider.

**Advantages & Disadvantages for Insiders & Outsiders**

Now that we have defined insiders and outsiders with respect to religious traditions and have explored what criteria make for understandability between them, we then are able to critically investigate some approaches to human behavior and communicability. Building on that, let us now consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of insiders and outsiders in interpreting religious traditions. Before we begin, it is important to make a distinction between advantages and disadvantages in
explanation versus interpretation of religious traditions. In other words, we will consider relative advantages and disadvantages of each position given that any valid interpretation, for us, is interpretation in which a new language can replace the original language of said object and even the status of the object (as measured before the interpretative process) must survive the translation. So, the interpretation we are hoping for ideally loses none of the depth or resonance of the original religion of the informant. It is this ideal of interpretation which we consider when assessing insider and outsider positions in the following section. In so doing, we will highlight the advantages of each position, carefully acknowledging that some, though not necessarily all advantages of one position will be disadvantages of the other.

Insiders Interpreting

“Our social worlds limit and restrict what we are able to perceive.” This limited perception occurs particularly when applied to religious understanding, and it is one reason that the insider is somehow privileged in the act of religious interpretation. Three distinct advantages to insider interpretation emerge, specifically those delineated by the limits of our social worlds, a certain ascertainable depth or resonance of experience we find in first person accounts of religion, and lastly the role of revelation in religious understanding.

The boundaries of our social worlds prescribe that certain understandings are disclosed to us easily and effortlessly almost by accident due to our surroundings.

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32 Here, we aim specifically to assess insider and outsider positions regarding *interpretation*, the distinction being that: “Whereas we see interpretation as an act of mediating an audience to an object, we see scientific explanation as an act of mediating an object to a framework. In interpretation, the object is the fixed point of reference; it is respected under its current description. In explanation, by contrast, the object is not the fixed point of reference; it is not respected as currently described, but only as redescribed.” From Tony Edwards, “Religion, Explanation, and the Askesis of Inquiry,” *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*, London: E.J. Brill, 1994, as in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, 202.

33 This articulation of “right” interpretation is made by Tony Edwards through his discussion of the distinction between interpretation and explanation.

This greater sense of the religion within an insider concerns intuiting the non-rational and also grasping intentions behind actions. Since religion has both rational and non-rational aspects (involving thoughts and feelings) complete access is difficult for an outsider. For them, direct, identical experience of the insider’s claims is impossible. While “one can observe, even share another person’s overt behavior…one cannot observe, let alone directly experience another person’s thoughts and emotions, one can only infer them.”35 This distinct advantage to the insider in the interpretation of religions is that they live in the inner world of perfectly-understood intentions and motivations, rather than being limited to ‘best guesses,” no matter how consistently accurate those guesses may be. Though they may, in extreme cases, be convoluted intentions and motivations, their deep-seated presence may still form a good bulk of “the center” of the faith, without which the religion may not be intelligible. Imagine trying to perceive, understand, and interpret the concept of time and significant events as expressed by aboriginal Australians…if a religious outsider has not experienced the social world prescribed by these conceptions, it will be difficult to understand other aspects of the religion such as the importance of places and creation myths.36

A second rich aspect of the perspective an insider possesses has to do with the immediacy of the language; an immediacy that wields authority. Such expression is unmediated in much the same way that uttering a word in one’s native language is, authoritatively referring to the meaning of one’s own speech-behavior. Using this linguistic model, some, such as Terry Godlove, argue that:

36 This begs the question, “What of the religious scholar who has lived amongst Australian aboriginals for thirty years, but who is not an aboriginal themselves?” This concern will be addressed in the conclusion regarding the potentials for insiders and outsiders for religious understanding and interpretation through cultural and religious immersion.
Speakers can be certain of the meaning of a word to be fixed (at least in basic cases) by the aspect of the world that prompts the word’s use…can be certain of the meaning of their words because whatever they regularly apply them to gives them their meaning.”

In this dimension of religious interpretation, religious insiders are much more “in the know” in that they have a great grasp of the depth or resonance of a particular religious experience. This sense of “the spirit” of a religion can come to a Christian, for example, from saying the Nicene Creed once a week for 60 years of their lives. Though its recitation may often be mundane, at times it is meaningful and quite meditative when taken in light of the weekly events of a lifetime, yielding a more sophisticated understanding of the theology and doctrines behind it. The last aspect of religion which seems to be more resonant with insiders than outsiders is the sense of the collective memory of a people. A Jewish person, for example, might argue that a scholar who has studied post-exilic Judaism for their entire professional lives might still not have a sense of the collective memory of the Jewish people, which would include many periods of exile, the Shoah, recent independent statehood and the ensuing strife etc. So, a second advantage given to insiders is their tremendous sense of religious depth given the unprocessed immediacy of their experience, the deepening profession of it over a life-time (both mundane and sublime), and the collective memory wielded by “their people” regarding their religious self-understanding.

Lastly, a clear-cut and perhaps incomparable advantage of insiders is the sense of revelation, holy spirit, or the divine working within their spiritual lives leading to a greater religious understanding. A Christian (no matter how recently-converted) might, for example, very well be said to have a greater understanding of the Christian

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religion than an outsider who is not open to the will of God working in their lives and their intellectual understandings. We see several advantages to insiders in interpreting religious traditions. Let us now examine what a religious outsider might bring to the act of interpretation.

Outsiders Interpreting

“Our social worlds limit and restrict what we are able to perceive.”\(^{38}\) Again, as it was important to realize our limited capacity for perception as outsiders, so too, is it important to realize that we are limited as insiders as well. Outsiders may be able to contribute to a more objective perception of a given religion because they are not bound by the same limits as are insiders. Two strong advantages to the outsider perspective appear to contribute to religious interpretation.\(^{39}\) The first and more obvious one is that outsiders come to a religion with fresh eyes and a fresh heart, and the second being the reductive tenor to religious interpretation to which the outsider perspective prescribes.

Given no need to de-naturalize a religious tradition before considering it (as insiders might be called to do), outsiders can start the interpretative process without “baggage-filled” foreknowledge. They are not blinded by the faith in which they are rooted, so they come to it with fresh eyes and a fresh heart for interpretation, rather than experiencing a tradition with the sort of passive absence that comes from habitual religious expression over a period of time. This new set of eyes peering on a religion may also have interpretative frameworks which are different in an illuminating way, such as a more objective historical viewpoint of Hinduism which could be taken by someone who is outside of the perspective of the caste system.


\(^{39}\) The numerical difference between the lists of advantages are not in any way meant to lend themselves to a quantitative comparison, but rather a qualitative one.
This freshness also signifies that the outsider brings a sense of identity over and against which to interpret this religious tradition, which could provide some clarity not present if you are an insider who has never known anything else.

The second advantage to the outsider position in interpreting religions is how religious interpretation is at least in some way suited to reductionism. Jonathon Smith argues that interpretation is never going to be non-reduced; that an initial reduction is always built into religious interpretation in that we must reduce religion into categories of knowable and unknowable. Using the example of the 1978 Jonestown incident\(^40\) in Northern California, Smith illustrates our need to initially reduce religious events, to connect them with something we already know in order to process them. In the Jonestown case, he suggests we call other suicidal religious incidents to remembrance\(^41\) in order to get our minds around the very existence of such a religious phenomena. This, Smith suggests, shifts the event into the realm of “knowable” things, and from there we can further understand and interpret it in a way that occurs when anyone, insider or outsider, examines such a manifestation of religious belief.

The second, more common-place aspect of this interpretative framework which privileges outsiders is that in reducing religions, \textit{and failing}, we \textit{still} gain knowledge which aids us in our understanding. Tony Edwards explains that “when we offer a correct explanation of a phenomenon, the result is a \textit{direct} gain in knowledge; on the other hand, when we offer a mistaken explanation of a phenomenon, there remains an \textit{indirect} gain\(^42\) in knowledge and understanding. In other words, what we lose from

\(^{40}\) The incident described was when James Warren Jones starting a religious community called the People’s Temple in Northern California which culminated in the assassination of a Congressman and a mass suicide of 914 people in what became known as “The White Night.” The full description of this incident is to be found in Jonathon Smith’s article, “The Devil in Mr. Jones” as found in \textit{The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion}, 370-389.

\(^{41}\) The example he suggest is recalling the self-immolation of monks in Vietnam.

being a disciplined outsider lies not in the interpretation, but in attempting to
redescribe a religion. The reductive necessity an outsider feels does not impair their
interpretative ability in any way, but rather provides for an increasingly more
sophisticated picture of the religion under examination.

So we see that, outsiders, as well as insiders, have distinct contributions to
make to religious understanding, specifically when it comes to the act of interpreting
said traditions. Given our conception of insiders and outsiders, our overview of what
and how we know, our sense of different aspects of human nature and behavior in
religious affairs, and some general advantages and disadvantages to both the insider
and outsider positions, we now have to decide what approach we ought to take in this
regard? How do insider and outsider contributions measure up and what value do we
gain by taking them together?

**Conclusion**

It seems to me that the insider/outsider question in the study of religions can
be framed as one both of form and content. The first issue is that of religious content,
discerning what it is that is irreducibly religious without which any conception of
religion would be off the mark. While in one sense everything having to do with a
religious tradition is important (its practices, beliefs, culture etc.) I believe that there
is, indeed, a center of any given religion, a key concept or set of concepts without
which the religion would be substantially different. In order to grasp Christianity, I
would suggest, one must have grappled with the concepts of incarnation and
atonement. An outsider will not be able to grasp any of the theistic religions if they
do not understand the concept of a creator-God. Similarly, a study of Buddhism in
which one does not deeply sense the ‘no-self’ concept would not have integrity. The

question is, then, can I, as a non-Buddhist, non-theist, or non-Christian actually come to an “understanding” of these concepts, or will I just be able to attain successively closer approximations of said essentials?

The key here is to latch on to the world-view of the religious insider in order to be in a legitimate position to interpret. An outsider, especially one who has experienced cultural and religious immersion in the tradition of interest, can sensitively and intelligently interpret the Buddhist tradition from the outside so long as they attempt to come up from under the tradition.\(^4\) So we see that an understanding of some key, illuminating concepts is necessary for an outsider to truly be able to interpret a religion. As for the rest, the less essential of the “essentials” of any particular religion, I favor the framework Clifford Geertz suggests.

Geertz manages to mediate two claims – the sui generis treatment of religion and the reductionist one – by suggesting outsiders can assess religious experience on its own plane, but only inasmuch as they can mediate it to their own experience in some sort of “experience-near” or “experience-distant” way. I appreciate this model in particular, because it recognizes that individual religious or non-religious people have differing webs of significance and meaning, but that understandings and interpretations of another religion can still have a place somewhere in the outsider’s web-like constellation of meaning. In this way, meaning can still be particular, with acknowledged blind-spots and limitations to individual understandings, but the religions themselves can be treated with a more universal significance as they manifest themselves in embodied tradition. Finally, in the treatment of religious

\(^4\) An example of this sensitivity to Buddhism as evidenced by an outsider attempting to “come up from under” a tradition would be a Christian who examines Buddhist practices, but does so constantly reminding themselves that in Buddhism \textit{practices}, rather than beliefs (as in Christianity) are central. Only proceeding from this understanding would a Christian’s interpretation of Buddhist practices have integrity.
content, I feel that while religious experience does have a rational aspects if we reduce religion to its constituent parts we lose the spirited nature of religion, in which case it is religion no more.

So now we have dealt with questions of content regarding religion, but what of the form that religious interpretation takes; the how of religious understanding? Among the models of human cognition, behavior, and organization we have examined, the empathic and reflexive theories are the most applicable to religious study, and perhaps to human conduct in general. In the empathic model, I appreciate the focus on understanding meanings. If the goal of religious study is religious understanding, rather than sociological understanding, anthropological understanding or psychological understanding, I think it is more useful to understanding meaning rather than motivations. If anything else is treated as the ultimate end for the religious outsider, then I think an evaluative, assessment-oriented approach will soon follow.

This is not the aim of religious understanding and interpretation…rather a humble goal of really “getting someone;” of sharing meanings is at the heart of the task for both insider and outsider. In the end, both form and content of an insider’s religion can be grasped by an outsider in illuminating ways which will provide understanding. This understanding may or may not be reflexively limited, just as the ability of the insider to communicate said religion may or may not have limitations as well. Coming from each perspective as insider and outsider, those involved in religious interpretation play each role as insiders and outsiders to each other as they

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44 For example, a rational psychological aspect concerning the brain chemistry which fires up during religious experience.
45 To further illustrate, when communicating themselves to others, religious insiders might add the phrase, “Do you know what I mean?” to the end of every sentence in order to ensure that they are being understood. This is not because whoever is listening to them is supposed to respond, “Yes, I know what you mean – you perform this certain ritual because you have a superstition that it will bring rain.” Rather, the outsider interpreter should answer, “Yes, I know what you mean – you perform this certain ritual because it brings rain” (while simultaneously realizing that they may not agree on the content of this ritual, but can still understand its significance for the insider, as described by the reflexive model.)
engage and inform. Ultimately, “outsiders’ can understand a tradition not their own, and only scholarship and understanding produced by both insiders and outsiders to a given religion would give the richest, most complete picture of a religious reality in the world.
Bibliography


Bibliography

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