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## Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions

N. Ross Reat

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Every religious tradition, by its very existence and regardless of its claims to universality, divides the world into two sets: insiders of the tradition and outsiders to the tradition. Thus, broadly speaking, information about religions may be transmitted through four channels: (1) insider-to-insider, (2) insider-to-outsider, (3) outsider-to-outsider, and (4) outsider-to-insider.

This broad classification of types of information about religion forms a convenient framework within which to classify and evaluate the dominant methods employed in religious studies as having recourse primarily to one channel or another. It also urges that approaches which employ only one or two channels are inadequate, and provides a paradigm for an adequate method which could serve as a basis of religious studies as an autonomous discipline.

### Critique of Existing Methods

One who maintains, for example, that only by being born and raised a Buddhist can one hope to understand Buddhism, and that one's best source of knowledge is other traditional Buddhists, emphasizes the first channel of information and would be classified as a traditionalist. A less extreme form of this approach, employing the second channel, would be one which allows that an outsider may understand Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on, by converting and studying with traditional teachers, thereby eventually becoming an insider.

The anthropological approach to religion also employs the second, insider-to-outsider channel, but maintains that a valid understanding of a religion can be gained only by an objective outsider who, remaining an outsider, obtains information from an inside "informant." The pervasive influence of these two approaches to religious studies is attested by the

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widespread currency of the notion that religious insiders are the only legitimate source of authority regarding any given religious tradition, and that they exercise an absolute veto power over the interpretation of their respective religions by outsiders. Thus, Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposes that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers”; similarly, W. B. Kristensen writes, “For the historian only one evaluation is possible: ‘the believers were completely right’” (Smith, 1973:42; Kristensen: 14; both quoted from Pye: 17). If, however, approaches which employ only channels one and two were indeed sufficient for understanding religion, religious studies departments would be superfluous. The self-understandings of the religions themselves and academic understandings gained through traditional anthropological methods would be sufficient. The existence of autonomous departments of religious studies implies that this is not the case.

The so-called anthropological approach to the study of religions, with the advent of theory, shades imperceptibly into the nonetheless distinct third channel, outsider-to-outsider, which may be classified as the comparative approach to the study of religion. Though a descendant of anthropology, comparativism tends to neglect informants, often regarding the protests of the insiders of the religion analyzed as mere annoyances which threaten grand, comparative schemes concocted to explain all religions as variants upon deep-level themes or structures. Historically, the term “comparative religion” was first associated with the now discredited evolutionistic theorists such as E. B. Tylor or J. G. Frazer, who tended to explain and categorize the world’s religions in terms of hierarchical, evolutionary schemes.

More recently, this evolutionistic brand of comparativism has been supplanted by a more acceptable brand of thematic or morphological comparativism often associated with the University of Chicago or more specifically with Mircea Eliade. The brilliant contributions of Eliade’s method to religious studies scarcely require recounting, but the failures of this method, particularly in the hands of those less prodigiously informed and insightful than Eliade himself, are numerous and often severe. Consider, for example, the remarkable distortion of Buddhism in the following passage from Richard Robinson’s *The Buddhist Religion*:

The study of comparative religion suggests two reasons why Gautama gave such prominence to a personal recognition of suffering. The first is that suffering is the hallmark of that condition from which salvation is sought. It results from sin (deeds committed out of craving and ignorance, not disobedience as in the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall), and until the results are seen for what they are, the remedy will not be welcomed. The second

reason is that suffering is the essential component of the chief primitive rites of initiation into adulthood. . . . The Buddha rejected extreme physical mortification, but in its place he put mental mortification, the contemplation of universal suffering. (29)

Such a multiple misrepresentation of Buddhism could reach print only as a result of the operation of a long chain of exclusively outsider-to-outsider channels of information. Any Buddhist who understood the words "sin" and "salvation" would object to even their qualified association with Buddhism in such a context, and no one with any experience of Buddhist meditation would accept its characterization as mental mortification, much less as a surrogate for primitive rites of passage. Yet this is only a particularly glaring example of the type of mistake which thematic comparativism encourages. Without such misrepresentations of specific religious traditions, broad, thematic treatments of religion are almost impossible. When one does eventually refer openmindedly to inside sources, one often finds that a great deal of the comparative information about religion and religions passed along from outsider to outsider is sheer fantasy. It is of little use and often counterproductive in understanding the religious phenomenon as it actually occurs in societies and most particularly in individual human beings.

A sympathetic understanding of religion as a human phenomenon of deep personal significance and uniquely evocative power is, however, the *sine qua non* of religious studies as an autonomous discipline. Without it, religious studies is merely a subheading of anthropology or sociology. This sympathetic understanding of religion is best gained through the fourth channel of information, outsider-to-insider, which may be characterized as "dialogue."

Dialogue, as opposed to anthropology, can occur only when a sincere, self-aware religious insider attempts to learn something about religion from outside his or her own tradition. In most cases, the outsider, the source of information in this channel, will be an insider with reference to some other religious tradition. There are notable instances, though, in which the outsider may be, strictly speaking, nonreligious—a Marxist, for example, as in the case of liberation theology. With specific reference to understanding religion, however, the most important characteristic of this fourth or dialogical channel of information is a personal approach to alien traditions with presuppositions along the lines of the following: "I know that my religion is an essential aspect of my life as a fully human being. However, I see other fully human beings who do not share my religious beliefs. Therefore, their beliefs, when fully understood, will be seen to fulfill the same urgent, existential needs—for example, the universal human need for meaning and purpose in life—that my beliefs do, and this is the key to understanding not only other

religions, but perhaps even my own religion." Pursued in this way, dialogue is probably the most effective means of learning what actually makes other religious people tick. Unless one has a lively, sympathetic, personal sense of the role of religion in human life, one cannot possibly understand or resonate with the living and lived reality of another person's religion.

This personal stance, which is the key to productive dialogue, is at the same time the source of the greatest danger the dialogue participant faces. In many cases, well-intentioned dialogue participants are not sufficiently clearheaded or courageous—are in fact dogmatic—concerning precisely what are those aspects of their religion which make it a necessary component of a fully human life. Many dialogue participants, in other words, neglect the last phrase in the preceding characterization of the ideal dialogical mind-set, that dialogue is perhaps the key to understanding one's own religion as well as those of others.

This failure may lead to the unwarranted assumption that those dogmatic elements of one's religion which immediately *seem* fundamental are in fact fundamental to all religions. With insufficient introspection, then, one may set out via dialogue to confirm the official tenets of one's religion, dogma by dogma, without reexamining one's own beliefs in the light of other systems of belief. The worst-case scenario, in this instance, culminates in "triumphalism," whereby one discovers in essence, and not surprisingly, that other religions do not succeed as well as one's own religion in elucidating the doctrines of one's own religion. More commonly, however, one enters into dialogue with the well-intended but misdirected sentiment: "What we have here is a failure to communicate," the famous lament of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the naive assumption being that we could not communicate perfectly and still disagree. Immediately after expressing this sentiment, Butch and Sundance were driven off a cliff by an apparently uncommunicative band of Mexican bandits.

In an analogous situation, Paul Tillich would fare little better with the following statement as an attempt to communicate with Buddhists: "Nirvana stands against the world of seeming reality as the true reality from which the individual things come and to which they are destined to return" (65). Most Hindus would accept Tillich's statement if it were made about *brahman*, and some Buddhists would accept it if it were made about *ālaya-vijñāna* or *tathāgata-garbha*, but it is not an accurate characterization of nirvana in any case, and even the concept of an ontological "ground of being" is alien to *Theravāda* Buddhism. If it is indeed true that an essential Christian concept is ontological continuity between the focus of the spiritual life and the existence of the manifold universe, it would be better to agree to disagree with many forms of Buddhism, most notably the *Theravāda*, on this issue.

The point here is that the traditional concerns and dogmas of any given religion can never serve as the whole agenda for dialogue. Such an attempt invariably results in one or both of two kinds of pious distortion: attributive and appropriational. If the traditional dogmas of one's own religion form the agenda, the most characteristic result is attributive distortion, falsely attributing one's own beliefs to others. If, on the other hand, the traditional concerns of another religion form the agenda, appropriational distortion, the "we have that too" syndrome, is the most dangerous pitfall. The preceding quotation from Tillich is an example of attributive distortion. Examples of appropriational distortion, which of course normally incorporate a measure of attributive distortion as well, are Lynn de Silva's writings on Christian *anattā* (1979:112ff.; 1975: 106–15) or attempts by Buddhists to appropriate the Christian concept of *agape* in the guise of an interpretation of the *Bodhisattva* concept.

Christian *agape* involves an appreciation and affirmation of the ultimate significance and worth of the individual human personality which is simply not found in its fullness in any other religion. Similarly, the Buddhist denial of a soul, with its consequent analysis of the mind, is unparalleled in psychological profundity among the world's religions. To trivialize these uniquely excellent aspects of other religions, by means of appropriational distortion and in the name of interfaith dialogue is, in effect, to fail to admit that one can learn anything really significant about religion from outside the boundaries of one's own tradition. This is perhaps an inescapable consequence if one approaches the study of religion *only* as an insider.

In sum, no one of the four channels of information dealt with above suffices to make possible an understanding of religion in general or of any particular religion, even one's own. Instead, in order to understand individual religions or religion in general, one must be able to participate, on the receiving end, in each of the four channels of information enumerated above.

### The Insiders-Outsiders Paradigm

The varying nature and content of the information transmitted in the different channels provides a system of checks and balances against the deficient understandings that may result even from thorough use of one or two channels exclusively. Though difficult, the comprehensive study of religion implied in the above critique can be undertaken successfully. This type of comprehensive approach, moreover, forms the basis of any methodology adequate to the unique purposes of academic religious studies.

As a preliminary illustration of the paradigm, let us consider a Buddhist attempting to do religious studies. In each channel, the second term

refers to the researcher, in this case a Buddhist. The insider-to-insider channel, then, refers to a Buddhist learning about Buddhism from another Buddhist who is speaking as a Buddhist. The insider-to-outsider channel refers to a Buddhist attempting to bracket his or her insiders' point of view and learn about some other religion, say, Christianity, from a member of that tradition who is speaking as an insider. The outsider-to-outsider channel refers to a Buddhist attempting to take an objective stance and learn about some religion or religions from someone who is also an outsider to those traditions. Theoretically, of course, the anthropologist or comparativist could consciously adopt an objective, outsider's perspective upon his or her own acknowledged religious tradition, so that the religion in the previous examples need not necessarily be non-Buddhist. The outsider-to-insider channel, finally, refers to a Buddhist learning as a Buddhist and from a consciously Buddhist perspective anything at all about any religion, including Buddhism, from a non-Buddhist.

The terms "insider" and "outsider" themselves may require further clarification. Their referents will naturally vary according to which religion is being considered. X may be an outsider with reference to Judaism but an insider with reference to Buddhism. In other words, X is a Buddhist, not a Jew. Furthermore, Y may also be a Buddhist, but consider X an outsider, because Y is a Mahāyānist and X a Theravādin. For the purpose of the theories presented here, it does not matter too much whether one wants to make the insider category broad, e.g., "Buddhists," or narrow, e.g., *Theravāda* Buddhists. As the paradigm is pursued, everyone will be an outsider in the majority of cases. Some may be insiders in more than one case, for example, once as a Buddhist and again as a Theravādin. Moreover, if the paradigm is pursued far enough, so that it begins to encompass apparently nonreligious worldviews, everyone will at some point be an insider.

The present paradigm may seem to exclude nonreligious persons from the profitable study of religion. This is not the case for two reasons. First, some legitimate studies of religion do not aim at understanding religion per se. The sociologist, for example, may be interested only in the roles certain religious beliefs or practices play in society. The psychologist may be interested only in the psychological implications of certain religious beliefs or practices. For these and other limited purposes one might well study religion profitably as an outsider only, using the second and third channels exclusively.

Religious studies, however, seeks to go beyond the limited understandings of religion which may suffice for some of the purposes of the other social sciences. In religious studies departments—if these departments are to be legitimately separate entities among the other social sciences and humanities—we seek an understanding of the phenomenon of religion

itself as it occurs in its multitude of forms in cultures, societies, and individual human beings. The insiders–outsiders paradigm suggests that this is not possible using only the “objective, empirical” methods current in the other social sciences, simply because some of the available information, that which is passed in channels one and four, is unavailable to noninsiders. Again, this should not be surprising, for the mere existence of religious studies departments indicates a widespread consensus that the methods of the social sciences are inadequate for the study of religion in its fullness. We in religious studies, however, have been somewhat lax in focusing this nebulous consensus into a clear formulation of methodological identity. The insiders-outsiders paradigm helps in this regard. In terms of the present paradigm, that which distinguishes our methods from those of the social sciences is the necessity of cultivating in religious studies an insider’s perspective. Proper definition of this perspective provides the second reason why nonreligious persons are not necessarily excluded from profitable participation even in religious studies itself.

#### The Necessity for Insidership in an Autonomous Method of Religious Studies

Though Paul Tillich has been criticized above, his terminology provides perhaps the most satisfactory definition of the insider in this scheme. The insider is, in Tillich’s terms, one who has an “ultimate concern” which is shared with others, and one who has adopted an approach to that concern, an *upāya* if you will, which is also shared with others. Neither the shared “ultimate concern” nor the shared approach need necessarily be “religious” in the normal sense of the term.

*Secular Social Science as Insidership.* It is important to stress that in the present scheme “ultimate concern” does not necessarily mean concern about something ultimate, as it did for Tillich. Here it means only a sincere, overriding concern which gives meaning and direction to one’s life. The truthful insider will, when asked, acknowledge this concern and, if pressed, defend its urgency and importance. The thoughtful insider will, moreover, be able to explain why he or she considers this concern ultimate, and why he or she thinks that the shared approach adopted is commendable. Such an insider may or may not recognize the ultimacy of other concerns or the validity of other shared approaches.

The absence of such recognition, however, precludes one’s understanding religion, but so does absence of an ultimate concern and a shared approach. In terms of the present paradigm, absence of recognition of other valid ultimate concerns and approaches would confine one to channels one and four, wherein one is an insider. Absence of an ultimate concern and a shared approach, on the other hand, would confine one to channels two and three, wherein the scholar is an outsider. This

second possibility might seem to describe an objective social scientist; but, actually, it would be a poor social scientist who would not affirm at least that contributing to human knowledge and well-being is an ultimate concern and maintain that the scientific method is a commendable approach, perhaps the best approach to that ultimate concern.

Many social scientists, of course, are religious insiders in the sense of belonging to one or another of the world's religions, and in most of these cases would consider religious concerns ultimate rather than the concerns of secular humanism. If, however, the social scientist is not a religious person in the traditional sense, and if a branch of secular humanism does truly provide the ultimate concern and shared approach, then the present analysis insists that the social scientist is merely a peculiar brand of insider who, in order to understand religion, or for that matter social science, must be prepared to utilize each of the channels of information elaborated above.

The nonreligious social scientist's training is, in essence, an example of the insider-to-insider, guru-disciple channel. He or she may, as an outsider, collect data about religions from religious insiders or from other outsiders, but he or she must also be prepared to participate in the dialogical channel as an insider of secular humanism who is prepared to learn from outsiders, i.e., religious people, about secular humanism as well as religions. The secular scientist, moreover, can no more fix the agenda for dialogue than the Buddhist or Christian. He or she must be prepared, like the religious dialogue participant, to recognize the fully human status of representatives of apparently different ultimate concerns, and must sympathetically attempt to understand how the human needs addressed by secular humanism are met in nonsecular traditions, and vice-versa.

The secular scientist must, in other words, take religion and religious people seriously, not merely take notes. To take another person seriously, whether in a religious context or not, requires, first, that one take oneself seriously, that one stand for something; second, that one respect the other person; third, that one face him or her eye to eye; and, finally, that one acknowledge that such an encounter has every prospect of changing one's own concept of the meaning and purpose of human life.

Historically, this has been the weak link in the social scientific approach to the phenomenon of religion. Social science tends to discourage personal involvement with one's subject matter, which might be appropriate to some purposes but certainly not to the understanding of religion, where a sincere, personal, ultimate concern is the very essence of the phenomenon. One who does not have or does not recognize such a concern within oneself, one who does not at least seek a form of human understanding which is like religious understanding in the urgency of the search if not in content, cannot understand religion. Though the

capacity to become an objective, uninvolved outsider is important in understanding religion, it is equally important to be an involved, concerned insider.

Thus, though the insiders-outsiders paradigm does not necessarily exclude nonreligious persons from profitable participation in religious studies, it does reverse the usual direction of apologies. Currently, religious people working in religious studies are typically anxious to excuse themselves for being insiders, whereas the present model suggests that the burden of explanation lies upon those in religious studies who claim not to be religious. This burden of explanation consists of locating one's nonreligious insidership and submitting it to the dialogue process as well as to the same critical evaluation exercised upon "religious" worldviews in the second, insider-to-outsider, channel. Millions of human lives have been lived and sacrificed in the service of the religions we study, and a blind intellect not grounded in an ultimate concern or exercised by a sincere, self-aware grappling with the problems and necessities of the human condition can never hope to appreciate the profundity of the religious emotion itself, much less the profundity of systems of thought and symbols capable of evoking these emotions in millions.

The present paradigm implies, by employing the term "insider," that this ultimate concern and the approach to it must be in some sense shared. This aspect of the paradigm may appear to be arbitrarily traditionalistic, rejecting independent religious and secular thinkers out of hand. Some people, for example, claim to have formulated their own religions or their own secular philosophies. They do not acknowledge insidership in any tradition.

One would not be far wrong, however, in saying that there are as many religions or philosophies as there are people, in that even self-confessed insiders of a single tradition evidence considerable variety in their understandings and expressions of that tradition. Similar degrees of variation might be accepted as eccentricity in one tradition and rejected as heresy in another. Even within a single tradition, one segment of constituents might consider heresy what another segment would accept with mild reservations. Most of those thinkers who claim to be independent, but for the claim of independence itself, would fit more or less comfortably in one established tradition or another.

Converse to the question of the individual accepting the tradition is the question raised by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "concerning the extent to which being a Christian, or a Muslim, means not only . . . accepting for oneself the Christian or Muslim tradition and community, but also the converse: being accepted by them" (1972:198-99). The present paradigm complicates both questions but simplifies the answer of defining insidership by raising the further question concerning the extent to which being a Christian or a Muslim, and so on, means not only accepting and being

accepted by the tradition, but also being classified as a member of the tradition, regardless of acceptance or acceptability, by distant outsiders to the tradition in question. This applies not only to so-called "independent" religious thinkers, but also to heretics and even to some atheists.

Freud's atheism is an extreme example of insidership by classification. It can only be understood a Buddhist or Hindu as Jewish or Christian atheism. Hindus typically regard the universe itself as the source of morality, so that Freud's characterization and rejection of God as an authoritarian, surrogate father-figure simply makes no sense unless the Hindu contextualizes Freud as a Jewish or Christian insider. Though Buddhists might applaud Freud's rejection of God, they would have to contextualize Freud as a Jewish or Christian insider in order to understand or sympathize with Freud's apparently naive assumption of the reality of a self composed of several distinct parts. From a Buddhist or Hindu perspective, then, Freud was a somewhat Christianized Jew, regardless of what he thought or of what Christians and Jews think. It is a matter of pure practicality that Freud would have had to recognize his insidership, albeit renegade, in order effectively to communicate with most Buddhists or Hindus. As it is, Freud's rejection of religion, and his alternative worldview, make little sense until one is familiar with the religious worldview he was rejecting. The same is true of many atheistic thinkers who, from standpoints outside the Jewish and Christian worldviews, appear to be merely critical contributors to the traditional concerns of Jewish and Christian thought. If this is true even of hostile atheistic thinkers, it is certainly true of heretics and "independent" thinkers. Arius and Thoreau were Christian insiders for the purposes of the present paradigm, as were Freud and Feuerbach.

Other "atheistic" thinkers, however, would be more properly classified as "nontheistic" or simply "secular," in that theoretically their thought is universally comprehensible on its own terms, without reference to traditional religious concerns. These thinkers may be broadly categorized as "secular humanists" or "secular scientific," though many further subdivisions might be made, as in the case of the world religions. Given the pervasive influence of this secular worldview, which forms the basis of the modern natural and social sciences and much modern philosophy and art, the present paradigm is not complete or workable unless secular humanism is recognized as a legitimate and independent form of insidership.

It will be noted that the present paradigm has generated, out of its own inner dynamic, a fundamental, and heretofore neglected, distinction in modern secular thought. This is the distinction between properly "atheistic" thinkers, whose theories rely on the religion being refuted, and truly secular thinkers, whose philosophies are based on nonreligious propositions. The former must be contextualized within a religious tradition in

order to be properly understood by distant outsiders, those who have not grown up in close association with the rejected tradition. The latter provide their own context by speaking directly to the empirical experience equally accessible to all human beings. Though secular thought is primarily a Western phenomenon, it knows no strict cultural boundaries. Theoretically at least, it can be assimilated and evaluated on the basis of empirical, testable, universal human experience. Secular thought is, then, a type of universal language, a philosophical Esperanto so to speak. Properly atheistic thought is more like a dialect. It cannot be fully appreciated without a knowledge of the mother language out of which it grows.

Though secularism knows no cultural boundaries, it is still, or rather can be, a form of insidership. One may, on the one hand, subscribe to a traditional, religious worldview and merely resort to the secular scientific tradition as a form of communication which is universally accessible simply because it does not rely on culture-specific assumptions. On the other hand, one may hold that the empirical methods of secular science are the *only* means to valid knowledge, in which case secularism becomes a worldview and a new form of insidership. The former case is like speaking Esperanto in addition to a traditional language. The latter is like speaking only Esperanto. The latter type of secularism, adopted as a worldview, comes about when one claims not only that one need not make religious assumptions for some philosophical purposes, but also that one should not make religious assumptions under any circumstances.

A significant number of people have decided in favor of secularism; and, assuming they have decided responsibly and sincerely, there is no reason they should not be able to contribute successfully to religious studies. According to the present paradigm, however, they must locate themselves as insiders of secular humanism and subject themselves to exactly the same learning exercises required of traditionally religious insiders. For the purposes of the present paradigm, the only major difference between insidership in secular humanism as a worldview and insidership in a traditional, religious worldview is that secularism is not necessarily associated with a specific culture. Many forms of religious insidership, however, also cross the usual cultural boundaries, for example, Asian Christians or American Buddhists.

*Belief as the Criterion of Insidership.* Thus, though one's insidership may be culturally determined, the more important criterion is belief. In light of the recent work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1977; 1979), it is well to define the term "belief" as it is used here, and to differentiate it from "faith," since Smith suggests that "belief" may be an inappropriate term in the religious context and should be replaced by "faith." Here, belief certainly does not mean thinking something is true without being able to prove it. Instead, "belief" involves sincere assent to certain fundamental, life-guiding propositions, with or without doubts. As a Buddhist,

for example, one may “believe in” rebirth and still doubt that such a thing actually occurs. Similarly, a secularist may sincerely believe in materialism and yet still wonder occasionally whether there might be some metaphysical reality. For a Christian, having faith in Christ is altogether different from believing that Christ is the son of God, for one *must* wonder what it means to be the son of God. In any case, “belief” merely means acceptance of a shared approach to an ultimate concern.

Conversely, it is on the basis of belief that one is accepted by a tradition or classified as belonging to a tradition, religious or secular. When, as a Christian, one says that one believes that Christ is the son of God, one means, in essence, that though the literal truth of that proposition may be questionable, one agrees that this is an important aspect of the avenue of approach through which one intends to pursue one’s quest for human purpose and meaning. As a Christian insider, in other words, one focuses one’s thinking about one’s ultimate concern in part by means of contemplation of the mystery of the nature of Christ.

To be sure, one’s beliefs may not exhaust one’s entire religious life. They do provide, however, the most important indicator of the company in which one stands with regard to the aforementioned ultimate concern and approach to it. The present paradigm insists that it is necessary not only to identify one’s beliefs, but also to make them public in order to function adequately in religious studies. One’s faith, by contrast, is a matter which probably cannot be made public. Whether or not “faith” is an appropriate term in non-Christian contexts, there is little doubt that every religious person, and probably most secular persons, feel some sort of deep-seated, unshakable, faith-like certainty. This emotion may well be the wellspring of religion, as Smith suggests. Still, belief remains a useful term indicating the means by which this faith-like certainty is expressed and the means by which this certainty is nurtured through the adoption of an ultimate concern and an approach to it. Thereby, beliefs locate one in the spectrum of religious and secular traditions. Beliefs, then, may be only the tips of icebergs, but to others navigating the ocean, the tip is a very important part.

Whether the different beliefs encountered in religious studies are the tips of many icebergs or the tips of one iceberg is a point upon which there will probably never be universal agreement. Even if, however, it were demonstrated that the faith-like certainties of all persons have a common object—in other words, that our ultimate concerns are one, that they are indeed “concerns about something ultimate”—we would still be left with the entire array of approaches to this ultimate concern. These various approaches would still be expressed in terms of belief. Why, for example, should a Muslim abandon his beliefs merely because he became convinced that Christian beliefs were a valid approach to the same goal?

The insiders-outsiders paradigm is not an argument for universal insidership. It implies, moreover, that universally shared religious insidership would be a negative rather than a utopian development. The ascendancy of a universally accepted worldview would, in effect, confine the whole world to the insider-to-insider channel of information and obliterate the entire system of checks and balances now available to us in the realm of our ultimate concerns. The only tempering of worldview we could hope for would be mild reservations raised by other insiders, such as those raised by Freud or Feuerbach within the Jewish and Christian worldviews.

On the other hand, the present paradigm does not imply that the interactions between different "beliefs" must be contentious or condemnatory. It is not necessary, for example, for the Christian to condemn the Muslim's "belief" that Muhammad is the "seal of prophecy." It is manifestly impossible, however, to "believe," in this specific sense, both that Christ is the son of God and that Muhammed was the seal of prophecy. Maintaining the definition of "belief" as an approach to one's ultimate concerns, to believe both propositions would mean diluting one's spiritual quest for purpose and meaning to the point that one's contemplation would have to be fuzzily focused upon the rather mundane mystery of the discrepancy between the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad instead of upon the infinitely more evocative mysteries of prophethood and divine descent. The old warning that "to do comparative religion is a good way to become comparatively religious" would have come true, to the detriment of the scholar and of religious studies in general. In common sense terms: one who tries to play all of the instruments in the orchestra will certainly play none of them well.

On the other hand, though, one who masters any instrument is likely to love and understand all instruments, and one who has not at least tried to master an instrument can never understand any single instrument or music in general, as opposed to being merely appreciative of and entertained by music. It is not appropriate here to discuss how one should go about mastering or attempting to master one of the religious or nonreligious traditions as an insider. Having argued that such an attempt is necessary for an understanding of religion, there remains for consideration only the means by which one might accomplish the complementary task of becoming a sympathetic outsider without compromising one's integrity as an insider.

### Application of the Paradigm

Like the Buddhist Eightfold Path, the so-called "steps" that follow need not necessarily be taken consecutively. In fact, each would be developed and refined over the course of an entire career. Logically,

though, the first step in the direction of understanding religion, regardless of one's present mastery of the "facts" of the world's religions, is dialogue, depicted in this paper as an outsider-to-insider channel of information with the scholar of religion on the receiving end. Sincere dialogue which does not transgress the guidelines adumbrated above should give one an appreciation and understanding of the internally coherent reasonableness of the various beliefs and practices of individual religions.

Dialogue, of course, does not necessarily involve a large round table beset by holy persons. It can be merely a sincere and sympathetic reading session alone in one's own study, or an appreciative contemplation of another religion while walking the dog. The essence of dialogue in any situation is simply giving the various religions credit for making sense to the millions who follow and have followed them, people very similar to oneself. Dialogue, then, is founded upon an attitude of humility, sympathy and sincerity, extended from out of one's own life as an insider to those outside one's own tradition. To reiterate, it is the *sine qua non* of understanding religion, and is by definition impossible without being an ultimately concerned insider, whether religious or secular.

Having taken this attitudinal first step, one is in a position to utilize, in a manner befitting religious studies as an autonomous discipline, the traditional methods of history, anthropology and sociology. When gathering facts in this manner, one is essentially an objective outsider studying subjects and informants. In the light of the present paradigm, much of the supposed aura of mystery surrounding "objectivity" in such situations appears to be artificial and in some cases even objectionable, especially as the term applies to religious studies. Some would suggest, for example, that to be objective is to be nonevaluative. One of the primary reasons for being objective, however, is to be able to pass fair judgment. Whether one reads or does fieldwork, the ultimate source of information about religion gained through the traditional methods of objective scholarship is always human. Therefore, regardless of which of the several estimates of the human race one subscribes to, a substantial amount of what one encounters is bound to be base and foolish. Not to evaluate it as such is a service to no one.

Objectivity construed as nonevaluation becomes actually offensive when the Western scholar attempts to "give the colored folks a break," as it were, by not applying to Eastern religions the same rigorous standards of historical and philosophical evaluation that are routinely applied to Western religions. Such apparent generosity is actually the most insidious form of chauvinism, all the more insidious if well intended. If facts about religion and religions are gathered in the true spirit of objectivity founded upon a sympathetic appreciation of the internally coherent reasonableness of the tradition, no religion is in need of an academic or spiritual Affirmative Action program.

The outsider's objectivity is, then, not a mystery. It consists merely of voraciously gathering facts about religions fairly and impartially, without condescension or malice, and with only one preconception: that eventually these facts will add up to a self-sufficient and internally coherent religious system that fulfills for its followers all of the existential needs and aspirations one knows personally as an insider in one's own tradition. The interplay between the anthropological and dialogical channels of information may be viewed as a bipartite system of checks and balances, the anthropological channel preventing pious distortion and contributing sophistication and detail to one's understanding of other religions, and the dialogical channel preventing mere sophistry.

In the present paradigm, the so-called anthropological channel of information is paralleled by a channel in the insider-to-outsider category characterized as "conversion." This reflects the situation that when an outsider approaches a religious insider with curiosity about his or her religion, and without obviously representing another religion, the outsider is viewed simultaneously as a potential threat, and a potential convert. In general, the more one can be identified as a disinterested, stereotypical anthropologist, the more threatening one appears. The more sincere one's interest seems to be, the more one is identified as a potential convert. This situation in the beholder's eyes is reflected in what is perhaps the hottest methodological debate of the day among anthropologists, namely, the debate concerning whether it is better to attempt to maintain objectivity or to attempt to immerse oneself in the culture under investigation.

For the anthropologist, however, immersing oneself in a primal culture poses as many theoretical and practical problems as maintaining detached objectivity, as Charles Vernoff's distinction between first and second order traditions illustrates. According to Vernoff, first order, primal traditions are culture-specific and are neither attractive to nor desirous of converts. The second order traditions, the so-called "world religions," result from the conflict and merger of first order traditions. As a result, they become universal in appeal, and invite the conversion of all people, more or less vigorously (Vernoff). There is, then, no theoretical problem involved in the proposition that one convert to any one of the second order religions usually encountered in religious studies as opposed to the first order traditions usually encountered in the anthropology of religions.

There is, of course, a comforting and long-cherished maxim in religious studies that one need not convert to a religion in order to understand it, but like most comforting thoughts, this too is false. Buddhism is the best case in point, especially *Theravāda* Buddhism. According to *Theravāda* Buddhism, if one understands Buddhism, one becomes a Buddhist simply because one recognizes Buddhism as being true. If one is not a Buddhist, on the other hand, it is only because one has not understood Buddhism. There is, of course, much to be done after one

becomes a Buddhist, so that the mere claim to be a Buddhist is regarded as little more than a statement of intent, regardless of whether this claim rests on birth or conversion. Buddhism is perhaps the clearest example of the link between understanding and conversion. Some religions, and even some forms of Buddhism, *Nichiren* for example, welcome conversion without understanding. Some religions, notably Christianity, seek a more impressionistic than rational form of understanding. All world religions, however, share to some degree with *Theravāda* Buddhism the conviction that true understanding is tantamount to conversion.

This implies that there are two alternatives for one who wants to understand an alien tradition. One may study the facts as an objective outsider until it becomes clear that one could conceivably convert to the tradition in question and have every prospect of living a fully rewarding human life. Otherwise, one may approach the study of an alien tradition *as if* one had already converted and it were one's only hope for salvation. The second alternative, being a temporary convert, is probably the more efficient, and there is no reason why one cannot approach every religion one studies as a temporary convert.

One might inquire as to the difference between being a universal insider, which has been condemned, and being a temporary convert to several religions. Reviving the musician simile, it is like the difference between trying to play all the instruments in the orchestra and being a master pianist, who, upon hearing a violinist, forgets about the piano and wishes she had taken up the violin. It is like the difference between being a mere translator, speaking several languages but having nothing to say in any of them, and being a polyglot statesman who masters foreign languages not for mere curiosity or pay, but out of a sincere desire to communicate and understand matters of weighty importance to the entire human race. Just as the pianist may bring to bear upon her own instrument insights gained in a violin recital, or as the statesman may attempt to incorporate the worthy ideals and aspirations of other nations into his own national consciousness, so the temporary convert, as opposed to the professed universal insider, maintains a focus of endeavor which imparts power and meaning to his or her missions to other religions. Having developed the capacity for "temporary conversion," one is in a position to take the next step in understanding other religions by partaking in the disciple's insider-to-insider channel of information in the tradition being studied.

One scarcely need argue the virtues of temporary conversion and participation in the disciple's channel of information when one may simply reel off a list of some of the most enduring giants of religious studies: Lamotte and Poussin in the study of Buddhism, Renou and Gonda in Hinduism, Arberry and Smith in Islam, none of whom found it necessary to abandon their respective traditions in order to gain an

insider's perspective on the religions they have studied. To find similarly excellent and enduring work, one would have to search among insiders and permanent converts, and even then would find none better. In fact, the shortcomings of the work of original insiders, such as Radhakrishnan, and converts such as Mrs. Rhys-Davids or Edward Conze, is often as problem-ridden as the work of those outsiders who have failed at temporary conversion. Lifelong insidership in a particular religion is, then, no barrier to virtual conversion and temporary insidership in other religions. A *Who's Who* of our own discipline reveals that much clearly.

Only the outsider-to-outsider channel of information, classified above as "comparative religion," remains to be considered. Though I have suggested that these "steps" are mutually supporting and must be undertaken simultaneously, one obviously cannot compare things one does not know about. Comparative religion is legitimately founded squarely upon the religious phenomenon as it occurs in cultures and individuals. The theories which it evolves should not be regarded as ends in themselves, but rather as contributions from seasoned scholars to help others sort through the myriad facts and details on the scenic but labyrinthine path to an understanding of the world's religions. Particularly fine theory may provide some insight into the nature of religion in general. The primary role of theory, however, is to elucidate and provide access to religions as they exist in the minds of their adherents. Theory should not, as is often the case, make the phenomena subservient to the theory and elucidate instead only the fertile imaginations of scholars of religion.

In the neutral, outsider-to-outsider territory, truly valid and helpful theories may be developed whereby we may be able to understand, for example, how the sonship of Christ and the final prophethood of Muhammad may be reconciled and seen as functionally similar approaches to similar ultimate concerns. An excellent example of such helpful theory is the well-known parallel between the virginity of Mary and the illiteracy of Muhammad, and between Christ and the *Qur'ān*. This understanding is based on theory necessarily formulated in the outsider-to-outsider channel. Such understanding, however, is no replacement for belief, as defined above, in the coeternality of God and Christ or God and the *Qur'ān*. Legitimate theory, in other words, does not seek to usurp the status of the beliefs it attempts to understand.

This is not to say that even as theorizing outsiders, scholars of religion are not as much phenomena as phenomenologists. We are, even in our roles as objective theorists, phenomena by virtue (and it is a virtue) of imbuing our theories and understandings of religion with the world-views we transmit as religious, secular, and cultural insiders.

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