

The Value of No Value Judgements in Religious Studies

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Abstract: Ultimate truths and dogma form part of many religions, which poses epistemological challenges to researchers who have differing beliefs yet wish to study these religions. I have argued that conceptual bridging is a prerequisite in meeting this challenge as religious studies scholars should have a deep knowledge base of a variety of belief systems to assist in conceptualising the believers' world. Scholars, however, need to be comfortable hearing the truths of others, which at times may be contrary to their own worldviews.

Navigating ultimate truths and dogma

1. **Hugh Gash** (§5) and **Larry Richards** (§3) both have concerns about narrow viewpoints and rigid attitudes within religious communities. **Marie-Luisa Frick** (§5) mentions the possibility of “unbridgeable” worldviews, which underscores these concerns about dogmatic and unilateral beliefs. **Gash** (Q2) asks how does truth fit in a relational approach in religious studies (RS) when participants sincerely believe in their truth? He is also concerned that it may be disrespectful to suggest to devout believers that there are other truths. My response is that the aim of the RS scholar is not to directly challenge the participant's conception of truth: the goal is to understand the participant's position rather than change her position. The participant's worldview is of interest and it is admirable that a participant is willing to share her worldview with the researcher. We, as researchers, seek the participants, not the other way around, thus we are the ones who seek to learn from them and understand their truths.

2. **Gash** (Q3) questions whether a focus on values may assist in mutual respect in dealing with value judgements – “Admitting one is wrong can be difficult, especially when one's self esteem or one's cultural identity is at stake.” If **Gash** is referring to sociopolitical intergroup interactions, in that case, I agree with his point on the underlying values as a common ground for consensus. However, in qualitative research, needing to admit fault in a way that challenges the researcher's own identity signals a red flag. RS scholars should have an interest in studying multiple faiths with the intention of sharing this experiential knowledge with interested readers. There should be no problem hearing the ultimate truths and doctrines from a variety of different participants along a scholar's research tenure. The goal is not to argue which faith is better nor convince the reader of how to become a devout follower of a certain faith; that is for theologians or believers themselves. Scholars of RS should thus be open to studying variety. A student of RS who motivates that she would like to undertake a research project and bases her motivation on her own devout following of her own religion may find that a supervisor would be unimpressed with this motivation. **Richards**'s (§4) suggestion that RS scholars engage participants in [cybernetic] conversations that demonstrate respect and dignity for alternative versions of spirituality is therefore a reasonable request.

3. **Frick** suggests that understanding the participant should take precedence over understanding each other. In §5, she says: “Surely, intersubjective understanding can

facilitate research endeavours but they certainly are not pointless where worldviews happen to be ‘unbridgeable’.” I understand this quote to demonstrate the hidden assumption that many researchers make: they can understand the participant without undergoing a change in themselves. This raises two ethical questions:

- a. Should a researcher be reporting on a research topic that she is unable to find a common linkage to?
- b. How does the researcher describe such research that is unbridgeable – what frame of reference does she use to contextualise her study when her worldview cannot encompass that of the other?

Thus, while **Frick** (§5) suggests that research from “unbridgeable” worldviews still holds merit, I am concerned about this point. What may be of more interest is the intersubjective attributes of the research relationship that gave rise to this “unbridgeable” situation in the first place; hence, the reason for my five reflexive questions (§18).

4. Thinking metaphorically about a bridge, one could imagine that each side connects to a different landform. If each side of the bridge represents one of the two different worldviews, the bridge is the link between them. To understand the one side, the researcher needs to understand what supports this bridge, and what frameworks one needs to be able to link to another. I contend that adaptation is required. One cannot bridge worldviews if one is not prepared or capable of constructing in one’s own mind the frameworks on offer from the other. To say worldviews are incommensurable would suggest that the researcher has not found a common ground. In his Q3, **Gash** suggests addressing this challenge and proposes that researchers either focus on common values or use Humberto Maturana’s (1988) “objectivity in parenthesis.” A researcher who finds her research position unbridgeable to her participants may need to rethink her position within her research. Thus, in terms of the two questions in §3 above, I contend that a researcher who cannot find a common linkage to her participant, should recuse herself from the project.

5. **Gash** (Q1) asks how discussants may be helped to use a process-based approach implicit in my §18. During investigative qualitative research, the interviewer could pose questions in a manner that is ethnographic or based on lived experiences, rather than aiming at declarative knowledge. For example, instead of asking what the rule is about prayers during the day, or what rules must be followed on certain holy days, the interviewer may ask how the participant manages her prayers during the work day, or how her religious life and work life overlap. In this manner, the participant describes the uniqueness of her experience of her belief system rather than the general customs. This shifts the focus away from reciting doctrines to one that is experientially vested in the believer’s life. Many organised faiths already have their scriptures describing the doctrines, thus qualitative RS is meant to engage the participant more personally in the tangle of the person within their belief system.¹ Thus, I agree with **Gash** (§5) in his

¹ Quantitative research is still part of RS, but the scope of my target article is on qualitative research.

suggestion that RS scholars should carefully consider their conversational questions to be process based focussing on how one arrived at her knowing.

Antitheses and observer effects

6. **Frick** (§7) notes that providing antitheses (§§37f) to one's thesis is a classical research approach and not novel. Formulating antitheses may imply that scholars think critically, but few books, journals, and video interviews show that scholars have found antitheses to their theses. Antitheses are neither an afterthought nor a "limitations" paragraph in the methodology section of a research report. Rather, they are the result of a careful reflexive review of what other factors may have been at play during the research that also may have provided the proposed outcomes. Research publications focus on the outcomes, not the possible antithesis to the outcomes, yet antitheses are equally valid, unless the researcher has perfect knowledge and made no errors. Thus, it is my (uncommon) viewpoint that antitheses have equal weighting to one's thesis.

7. When analysing antitheses, it demonstrates the RS scholar is aware that multiple worldviews are available, and her writings should demonstrate this. The role of antitheses, however, is not to undercut the participant's worldview, antitheses are used when the researcher reaches conclusions – it is the antitheses to the researcher's point of view. Thus, while **Gash** (§5) and **Richards** (§3) share similar concerns regarding rigidity and dogmatic notions within religions, RS is not meant to be a mechanism of coercing, evangelising, or performing ministerial work. In this light, one could hope that the scholarship of RS would reduce disinformation and heuristics, as discussed by **Gash** (§8) and Gash (1992).

8. **Frick** (§§8f) wonders what the point of my five reflexive questions is, if objectivity is not the aim of the research. In §9, she raises the question: "If Baron, however, denies a categorical difference between observers and observed, anyway, why would he worry about something like an observer effect in qualitative research?" While the observer and the observed are connected in a circular system, there is more than one observer. Each researcher is a unique observer describing what she has observed (her research). Since each observer observes differently (target article §§8–13), and most noticeably in topics that require deep discussion, different observers have different observer effects introducing multiple realities – observer effects. If there was only a single observer, one human, then I agree with **Frick** (§§8f) that there would be no need to quantify an observer effect.

Language and conversational domains

9. **Richards** (Q2) would like clarity on how RS may contribute to the cybernetics of consciousness, mind, and thought.² For him, language is the basis for knowing – the

² **Richards**'s (§8) interest in how the notions of purposefulness, hierarchy, and reward are strongly embedded in some religions while not in others, is an interesting question but out of the scope of this response. Richards's (2017: 365–366, 2013) recommendation for cybernetics providing contributions to the consciousness of purpose is a valuable research topic that engages RS from a systemic viewpoint.

expression of what we know, while “mystical” is the unsaid and indescribable (§5). This point aligns to an ongoing debate on mysticism and spirituality in RS. In this debate, there are two poles. On the one side, the constructivists generally argue that mystical experiences are vested in language (Katz 1992). Steven Katz, for example, attributes more than just sound to spoken words, he describes how letters and words intermingle into the central essence of divinity. He bases his conception on Koranic verses, Buddhist *Zen koans*, and the Hebrew alphabet and the specific letters used as part of these texts. On the opposing side of this debate, Robert Forman (1999) describes what he has termed a “pure consciousness event” (target article §37), which he argues transcends language and culture. Thus, for Foreman, mystical experiences do not necessarily require language as a baseline. This well-developed debate may be useful for cyberneticians.

10. While this is only a brief response to Richards’s Q2, conversational domains are the best format that researchers currently have. I have also argued that Conversation Theory³ should be a foundational topic in RS, psychology, and educational research (Baron 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). Gash (§1) underscores this point that RS could provide a strategy for educational discussions. Thus, Richards’s Q3 of whether the cybernetic idea of conversation should become an integral aspect, of not only RS, but of all religions, is in line with my own thinking.

11. I have grappled with the topic of consciousness outside of language. Consider the early stages of dementia and how the patient starts losing her diction. In such cases it can be observed that the patient intends some meaning but that meaning is not forthcoming. Observers of this situation may notice the patient’s frustration as she has limited mechanisms to support her conscious thoughts, which raises the question of whether these thoughts are based in language?

12. A case that is worthwhile analysing is the case of Ildefonso. Susan Schaller (2012) describes the life of a deaf man named Ildefonso whom she called “a man without words.” Ildefonso was attending a class for deaf adults who were attempting to learn to read English. In this class, Schaller observed that Ildefonso did not understand verbal language nor sign language. He did not understand Schaller’s communication; he did not understand that her communication represented abstract concepts or that language was a form of representation. A breakthrough happened when Schaller began signing the word “cat” to an imaginary student and Ildefonso suddenly understood her attempt to communicate meaning. At this point he began to cry because he became aware that language was a form of representation. This myth-breaking story describes the life of a man who lived in solitude and upon obtaining language as a form of meaning representation, his life changed and improved significantly.⁴

Qualitative religious studies and its inimitable research field

³ Conversation Theory is a cybernetic framework that provides a scientific approach to how people construct their knowledge (Pask 1975, 1976a, 1976b; Scott 1993).

⁴ The point is made by Ildefonso. Video file: “A Man Without Words”
<https://vimeo.com/72072873>

13. **Frick** (Q1) asks on what grounds I have arrived at my critique about RS methodology. Owing to a space limitation, I did not include a review of the ongoing debates in RS methodology in my target article. Below, I will briefly summarise some of the key points that supported my critique.

14. Mircea Eliade (1969) suggested that religion stands apart from the context and cannot simply be reduced to contextual enquiries, acknowledging RS as unique. Eliade's position should be understood as one that promotes irreducibility of religious phenomena, including an "inability to understand religion in other terms than its own," understood by only the believers themselves, thus excluding other fields of enquiry, such as psychology or sociology (Segal 1983: 98). However, there is debate about this uniqueness. Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) argues that if RS is a separate discipline, it introduces the *sui generis* into this field, which also implies a unique research methodology. Russell McCutcheon (1997) points out that objective validity is unfavourable owing to the ideological, historical, and political interests and their roots, which contextualise RS research. Jason Blum (2012), in turn, suggests that RS should be part of social sciences and examined as such – not seen as something autonomous and transhistorical. Fitzgerald (2000: 4) asks what religion and religiosity are, and, in turn, implies a question about what the scope of religious studies is. His point on the definition of terms rests on his view that the term "religion" tends to provide an "illusion that religion has some distinctive analytical validity, even though it might be difficult to specify precisely what it is" (ibid). This argument about defining key terms in RS depicts that even scholars within this discipline experience challenges when defining terminology.

15. Rudolph Otto (1958), in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, stated that if the reader had not had a religious experience, she would be wasting her time reading his book, for there would be a lack of understanding. Daniel Pals (1994) describes this impasse by asking the scholar if she is going to import the religious claims of the research subject, or is the scholar going to fulfil a reductionist approach focussing only on the elements, i.e., is the researcher going to report as a theologian or as an atheist (Blum 2012: 1039)? This brief review shows that the topic of RS research methodology is not without the theology question: are you a believer or not?

16. From the above arguments, the reader may conclude that there are challenges in how the RS scholar conducts her qualitative research. There is still a lack of conceptual clarity and methodological rigour in RS (Blum, 2012: 1026). Thus, to address **Frick's** Q1, I am continuing this critique by demonstrating that social justice, worldviews, and observer dependence further conflate the methodological challenges facing scholarship in qualitative RS. These methodological challenges are some of the reasons why I have proposed a personalised, relational, and an observer-included research approach. The reader should know the researcher's position to her research, especially since this discipline has not reached consensus about research methodology.

17. In her Q2, **Frick** raises the question of whether methodological pluralism is an indication of epistemological weaknesses. To address this question, we first need to find a proper definition of pluralism. While there is diversity in the arguments for different methodologies, I am yet to find volumes of RS research methodology textbooks that

provide qualitative methods for students to follow. In South Africa, as I am sure elsewhere, the student of RS relies on the well-developed research methodologies of sister disciplines (anthropology, sociology, and psychology). However, even in these disciplines, a methodology that accounts for social justice, epistemology, and observer dependence is less common and is rarely part of a university curriculum. The mainstream approach, even for qualitative designs, still proposes the researcher as an independent and objective research instrument. Thus, the idea of the researcher's worldview being part of her research is uncommon, even though it was prescribed by Jonathan Smith: "the student of religion [...] must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study" (Smith 1982: ix). Thus, while there are debates about the paradigm the researcher uses, details regarding how a researcher may achieve a study that addresses both the researcher's and her participants' epistemology and how their worldviews arise are less forthcoming.

18. **Frick** (§5) rightly requires more details describing how a researcher may bridge her worldview to that of her participant's as described in the target article (§18). This question speaks to her own earlier question (Q2) about plurality of RS methodologies. If there were plurality in approaches, there would already be publications addressing her question on how a researcher may bridge worldviews. My point is that there are scarce writings on this topic, hence I suggested second-order cybernetics (SOC) as a viable option. **Frick** (§5) is correct in suggesting that there should be a detailed text on how a researcher could attempt such research. The purpose of the target article was to provide a theoretical basis for why a personalised and relational research approach is needed. Building on my doctoral study, a practical explication of this approach is now needed.

19. In §6, **Frick** expresses scepticism about my point that researchers should track their perceptual changes along their research. She asks what a relation between tracking perceptual changes and the observer effect could look like. While in §6, she suggests that researchers should document their assumptions early on in their research by the use of bracketing – as is commonly undertaken in social studies. My response is a question that highlights the temporal attributes of bias. How does one bracket bias that one does not know exists as this bias is only uncovered in the doing of the research, for example, studying an indigenous culture who do not shake hands, yet the researcher starts all her interviews with an attempt at a handshake? If this bias is only known after the research has started, what impact did the not knowing about this cultural characteristic have on the research, as the researcher did not know that she did not know?

20. There are some conscious assumptions one knows about at the inception of a study, but others are only uncovered as the researcher learns about her participants. As the study progresses, there is an evolution in the thinking of the researcher and how the participants relate to the researcher's worldview, which unavoidably impinges that of the participants.

A menu of religions

21. **Richards** (Q1) asks whether RS may offer people a manner of understanding diverse belief systems with the goal of a flexible approach to pragmatically shifting

across worldviews that are fit for purpose in a certain life stage or life event. In his §7, he describes a possibility of religion as a temporary choice – a menu of religions available for the interested reader.

22. Since RS provides the reader with a wide-ranging and comparative scope of religions, the reader who wishes to move across religions could find RS publications a useful avenue to address her needs. A feature of RS that sets it apart from theology is that there should be no hierarchy in the presenting of religions. A menu does not rate the food from best to worst, it is a list of what is available.

Reliability and trustworthiness

23. Aiming for reliability in the sense that **Frick** (§§8–10) implies (repeatable results from different researchers) is an important part of quantitative research. A questionnaire may be reliable under the small defined scope of use; however, when we move to the domain of the human condition as experienced by individuals, the reliability (in terms of repeatability) is reduced and the term is moot. If I aim to repeat my study over and over again and achieve similar results with new participants, that implies that I am static and that new participants would provide the same answers. The research may be trustworthy, but unlikely to be duplicated since researchers and different participants do not have duplicate worldviews.

24. How may a researcher determine whether she achieves a trustworthy qualitative study? By analysing the nature of her approach to her study: her observer effect, her perceptual changes, her antithesis to her thesis, and how she coupled to the system (§§18–38). However, the attribute of “trustworthy” is not owned by the researcher alone, it is a term that describes an intersubjective experience between the researcher and her audience. The attribute “trustworthy” is thus provided by the reader from the experience of the researcher’s work and ultimately rests on the reader’s perceptions as she evaluates the methodology of the study. The term “reliability” in qualitative studies should be used with caution.

Conclusion

25. In a court case there is a discovery process, i.e., the pre-trial task of providing evidence to the parties to the trial. If we metaphorically analyse this in terms of a research project, the discovery is like the researcher’s proposal (hypothesis, literature review, and intended methodology) – the researcher’s initial ideas about her knowledge and bias. Once the trial begins, the cross-examination is the test of the evidence in community with the parties. What is interesting are the changes that take place as the case progresses and the evidence is seen in a new light. The verdict is important but what is also important is how the arguments evolved along the trial. Lawyers study the cases, including the arguments presented, and use these to inform their new cases. Similarly, in qualitative research, the declaration of assumptions, literature review, etc., are an ongoing dynamic activity. The researcher’s evolution in her thinking is valuable as she conceptualises a new worldview providing the reader (and other scholars) insights into the participant’s world, as well as a foundation for how one may

conceptualise such a world. This is an ongoing and incomplete process as the discipline is called religious studies, not religious studied.

26. Investigating the diverse beliefs and values of a participant is challenging for the researcher whose worldview differs considerably from her participants. I have argued for a researcher-included methodology whereby the researcher (and her influence) is actively incorporated in her study, as she acts as the primary contributor colouring her methods and findings. Bias (and epistemology) reflects the researcher's beliefs, values, and actions, which impact her research. SOC offers well-defined frameworks for managing the epistemological hurdles of recursion, observer dependence, conversational domains, and circularity that a researcher faces as she enmeshes herself in the worldview of her participants. Thus, qualitative RS may benefit from SOC theories. For example, SOC has been shown to be a useful approach in several disciplines that also have epistemological challenges, including psychotherapy (Bateson 2000; Keeney 1980), education (Baron & Herr 2019; Herr 2014), design research (Sweeting 2016), and performing arts (Scholte 2016).

27. Recently, there have been publications that are geared towards cybernetics methodology as a scientific approach aptly termed second-order science (Müller 2008, 2011; Riegler & Müller 2014, 2016). The underlying premise in these publications is that cybernetics can provide a vehicle for research methodology by providing tools that enable second-order studies across multiple disciplines (Riegler & Müller 2014). However, clear methodologies that describe practical avenues and examples for scholars are still uncommon. Thus, the practical explication of SOC in qualitative RS may provide SOC with a much-needed text that students may use as an example of how to enact SOC theories.

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