

IN SHORT

OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY IN STUDIES IN RELIGION AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND, 1986–2010

Neil Pembroke

The author offers a personal reflection on some developments in the approach to methodology in the study of religion at The University of Queensland over the past twenty-five years. In the process, he covers issues such as methodological atheism versus methodological agnosticism, the relationship between faith and reason, and mutual critical correlation.

What is offered here is a personal reflection on some of the movements in the approach to method in the study of religion here at The University of Queensland over the past twenty-five years. I have used the outsider/insider theme to organize the material. In relation to the insider issue, the focus is generally on Christian theology because that is my particular research area. However, I recognise of course that much the same issues apply in relation to Jewish and Islamic theology, as well as to disciplines such as Buddhist and other Asian philosophies, and to the spiritual principles associated with various new religious movements.

The question of the relationship between studies in religion and theology is an important one on the world scene. There are some religious studies departments that eschew theology completely. Others are inclusive, adopting titles such as the “Department of Religious Studies and Theology.” There is also a Canadian journal entitled *Religious Studies and Theology*. The relationship between the two academic approaches to religion has featured at certain points in the history of UQ’s Department (now discipline) of Studies in Religion.

I remember very clearly the kinds of debates that were prominent in what was then the Department of Studies in Religion in the mid to late 1980s. I had arrived on the scene as a Bachelor of Theology student at the Brisbane College of Theology also enrolled in the BA (Hons) programme. Methodological issues were very prominent in the Studies in Religion offerings. Richard Hutch taught a mandatory second level course on methods, and there was an honours seminar devoted to the topic. The strong emphasis on methodology was due in part to historical factors. The Department was established in 1975 with three clergymen as the lecturing team: Rev. Eric Pyle, Rev. Dr. Ian Gillman, and Rev. Dr. Peter Carnley. In the early 1980s the Brisbane College of Theology was launched. This meant that quite a bit of the

NEIL PEMBROKE is Senior Lecturer in Pastoral Studies in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics at The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. He is currently Discipline Convener for Studies in Religion. He received his PhD from New College, the University of Edinburgh. His recent books are *Pastoral Care in Worship* (London: T and T Clark International, 2010), *Moving Toward Spiritual Maturity* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2007), and *Renewing Pastoral Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

student 'market' was lost to the new competitor. This was one factor that led the staff in the department to head in the direction of a fully-fledged programme of academic study of religion and the religions. In line with this, there was a focus on distinguishing this approach from that of theology.

In the honours seminar on methodology, we were required to read articles by Donald Wiebe¹ and Ninian Smart.² Wiebe argues that the only legitimate methodological stance for the scholar of religion is an atheistic one. He is enthusiastic in his support of Robert Segal in his attack on the approach of scholars such as Mircea Eliade who, it is claimed, work with an 'uncritical assumption of the existence ... of the transcendent referents of religious discourse (belief) and symbolic import of ritual and moral behaviours.'³ Wiebe also opines that the 'crypto-theology agenda' that operates in some religious studies departments constitutes a 'failure of nerve.'⁴

Smart, on the other hand, contends that methodological agnosticism is the appropriate approach. He avers that the scholar of religion 'should treat the objects of religious experience and beliefs as factors independently of whether they exist/are true.'⁵ On this view, it is not necessary to decide whether Allah actually revealed truth to Muhammad to observe that Muhammad's inner conviction that this took place resulted in a movement that has changed the course of human history. I remember at the time being strongly convinced of the logic associated with this position and arguing quite passionately for it in the seminar. I also remember being somewhat disconcerted by Wiebe's exclusivist approach. He contends for an exclusively outsider approach, arguing that the introduction of theology into the domain of study of religion has 'infected' it. This was rather confronting for someone who at the time was also training as a theologian and planning to work in the psychology and theology dialogue area in his honours research.

An outsider can take her pick in relation to methodological agnosticism or atheism. An insider, however, needs to contend with the issue of the relationship between faith and reason.⁶ The English mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–1879) contended that '[i]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'⁷ He goes on to say that:

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind ... and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it – the life of that man is one long sin against mankind ...⁸

If Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) had lived after Clifford, he would have felt very confident about meeting the challenge thrown down by the mathematician. According to Aquinas, there are two categories for truths about the divine. First, there are truths that it is possible to demonstrate by human reason, and second there are truths that cannot be known by reason alone. Included in the first category, we find truths such as God exists, God is good, and God created the world. Aquinas believed that his 'Five Ways' provide a convincing case for the claim that God exists. He can be classified as a strong rationalist.⁹

At the other end of the spectrum we find fideism. The fideist contends that it is legitimate to hold a religious belief simply on the basis of faith assumptions alone. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is

1. D. Wiebe, "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 13:4 (1984): 401–422; and D. Wiebe, "Beyond the Sceptic and the Devotee: Reductionism in the Scientific Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52:1 (1984): 157–165.

2. N. Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); and N. Smart, "The Scientific Study of Religion in its Plurality," *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* 1 (1983): 365–378.

3. D. Wiebe, "Beyond the Sceptic and the Devotee: Reductionism in the Scientific Study of Religion," 158.

4. D. Wiebe, "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion."

5. N. Smart, "The Scientific Study of Religion in its Plurality," 183.

6. For a helpful overview of this issue, see M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief*, third ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 39–53.

7. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Rationality of Belief in God*, ed. G. I. Mavrodes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 159.

8. *Ibid.*, 159–160.

9. Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 42.

scornful of the approach to religion that examines its truth claims through objective, detached analysis of evidence.¹⁰ Objective, rational inquiry into religion is always an 'approximation process.' One moves closer and closer to the truth but can never quite get there; there is always one more piece of evidence to evaluate. What is required is the courage to take a 'leap of faith.'

The contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga sums up the fideistic approach this way: '[I]t is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all.'¹¹ Clearly, he is contending against Clifford's view that a belief is rationally justified only if there is sufficient evidence for it. Plantinga begins his argument with the observation that we believe some things without being able to prove them. These are called our *basic beliefs*. Everything that we claim to know is built on the foundation of our basic beliefs. One example of these beliefs is associated with sense perception. I hold up my hand in front of me and I know that it is my hand that I am looking at and not someone else's. I don't need any evidence for this. Another basic belief has to do with memory. For example, 'I had breakfast this morning.' I know that I had some Weeties at around seven o'clock this morning. It is not something that I need to prove. Plantinga argues that there are also basic beliefs that theists work with. By definition, these beliefs do not require evidence or proof. Examples are as follows: (1) God is speaking to me. (2) God has created all this. (3) God disapproves of what I have done. (4) God forgives me. (5) God is to be thanked and praised.

Most theologians would describe themselves as critical rationalists. They are uncomfortable with both strong rationalism and fideism. Over against the fideist, the critically rational theologian contends that it is possible to rationally critique and evaluate one's own religious tradition. Indeed, this is seen as a vitally important role for theology. Critical analysis has the power to purify a tradition of its destructive and unhealthy elements. In contrast to the strong rationalist, the critically rational theologian rejects the notion that reason has the power to provide conclusive, universally convincing proof that one's religious system is true.

To return to my experience in the honours seminar of 1987, I also have a vivid memory of Philip Almond and Richard Hutch offering two quite different approaches to research on religion and the religions. Philip discussed Smart's approach and emphasised the role of critical reason, whereas Richard used the work of Sigmund Freud to challenge what he saw as an over-emphasis on rationality. I still remember his punchline: 'Freud's work on unconscious drives serves to remind us that we are not quite as rational as we like to think that we are.' Richard also discussed the approach of some insiders who see their intellectual research on religion as a devotional exercise. Philip identified what he saw as the problems with such an approach. In response, one of the students put this question to Philip: 'Doesn't the fact that you don't have faith mean that your understanding of the Christian tradition that you teach about is necessarily limited?' His reply was that the only thing he is unable to understand is what it is like to have faith. Clearly this is right. Outsiders in the academic study of religion understand the history, sacred texts, ethics, theology, philosophy, etc., of a religious tradition much, much better than the vast majority of the adherents.

Given that in my honours days Philip Almond was strong on maintaining the distinction between the academic study of religion and theology, I was a little surprised when in 2004 in his new role as Head of the School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics he asked me, in my new role as lecturer in Studies in Religion, to do some work on introducing a doctorate in the practical theology area. One of the recommendations from the review of the school that took place in that year was that such a programme should be offered. In 2006 the programme began with twelve candidates enrolled.

Disciplines that are relatively new, or that are at a critical point in their development, often become heavily-focused on methodological issues. I happen to be involved with two disciplines that have been

10. Fideism comes through in the views expressed by 'Johannes Climacus,' a pseudonym who is the ostensible author of certain books by Kierkegaard. It is difficult to know to what extent Kierkegaard embraces some of the views presented.

11. A. Plantinga, "Reason and Religious Belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 17.

in this situation. Those associated with studies in religion in the 1970s and 1980s devoted so much time and energy to issues of method partly because of a felt need to draw a line between it and theology. Practical theologians were similarly preoccupied in the same period. The reason was obviously different in their case. Leading thinkers such as Don Browning at the University of Chicago, Elaine Graham at the University of Manchester, Duncan Forrester at the University of Edinburgh, and Gerben Heitink at the Free University of Amsterdam worked hard to establish practical theology as a discipline that rightly belongs in the academy. In order to do this, they needed to develop a rigorous methodology. The method that is commonly used is called 'mutual critical correlation.' Inspiration was drawn from the work of the philosophical theologian David Tracy. He argues that theologians need to engage in mutual critical correlation between religious perspectives and cultural sources (philosophy, psychology, anthropology, etc.).¹² Tracy's approach represents a revision of Paul Tillich's correlational method. In his philosophical theology, Tillich aimed to correlate Christian perspectives with the cultural situation.¹³ Tracy shows, however, that Tillich's method does not actually call for a correlation between results from investigations of both cultural interpretations and religious values. Instead, it asks for a correlation of questions generated by cultural analyses with answers provided in the Christian message. If the cultural expressions are taken seriously, their answers to their own questions will be analysed critically. A critical approach must compare the religious answers with those from all other relevant sources. Tracy helpfully points out that what is needed is a method capable of correlating the questions and answers from both sources. The questions and answers provided by a reinterpreted religious consciousness need to be critically correlated with the questions and answers contained in a reinterpreted cultural consciousness. This is the methodological approach that is commonly adopted by practical theologians.

There have always been both outsider and insider approaches in Studies in Religion at UQ. The research line-up today looks like this. As has already been indicated, I work in the practical theology area. My major areas of interest are pastoral care, and theology and health care. I mainly use the critical correlational method, but have also done some empirical research. Rick Strelan focuses his research on the cultural world of the first Christians with attention given primarily to the literary sources, especially the New Testament. His approach is socio-historical, as his research deliberately draws attention to those cultural aspects which might be considered strange to the modern Westerner. Richard Hutch is still with us. His approach is best described as the phenomenology of religion, processed through the social sciences. For the most part, he eschews postmodern considerations. Richard's monographs explore the interface between religious experience in the life of the individual and its personal, social and cultural expressions in contemporary world history. Phil Almond has moved into UQ's Centre for the History of European Discourses. His current research interests include apocalypticism in early modern England and demonic possession, exorcism, and witchcraft in early modern England. He has particular interests in themes in religious cultural history in the early modern period. Sylvie Shaw's focus is on the interconnection between people, the environment and spirituality. She uses a qualitative methodology. Sylvie is currently completing a study on the impact of fisheries decline on fishers and their families in three Queensland regions. Her next project examines the values held in the community about south-east Queensland's waterways. Roxanne Marcotte engages in research on Islamic Studies, modern and classical Islamic thought, medieval Islamic philosophy (Arabic and Persian), and women in Islam. Most of her work is textual study. Last but not least, Adam Bowles is a scholar of Sanskrit literature and South Asian history and religion. His current research falls into two broad categories: studies of and translations from the great Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*, and aspects of governance and religion in the eighteenth century.

12. D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

13. P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (London: Nisbet and Co., 1953).