



Fieldwork and the Reflexive Stance: Managing the Relationship between Methodological Agnosticism and One's Own Academic and Religious Standpoints

In 1999, Russell McCutcheon outlined the historical development of four methodological approaches within the Discipline of Religious Studies: the empathetic, explanatory, agnostic, and the reflexive. The first aims to understand the experiences, meanings, and intentions of participants. This is deemed impossible by the second, which maintains that such characteristics of human activity, opaque to the researcher, should be studied empirically with a view to explanation. From the tension between these two arises a third and mediating position, methodological agnosticism, which ideally brackets truth claims and emphasizes accurate description and comparison. This is seen as unrealistic by the fourth position, which maintains that the beliefs, experiences, meanings and intentions of religious participants are always refracted through the researcher's own.

This paper discusses my experience of the fourth position by recounting some key problems of interpretation and understanding arising during my fieldwork with a Vipassana (Insight) Meditation group. I believed that I had set out from the position of methodological agnosticism, and approached the religious perspective of Vipassana meditation with an open mind. However, I soon found myself facing my own academic and religious perspectives, and observing my own process of change as I worked with the interpretive frameworks and practices of Vipassana meditation. It is my conviction that the ideal of the third position provides a counterbalance to the subjectivity of the fourth.