Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange:
Fieldwork Placements in Religious Communities

Catherine A. Robinson

Introduction

Religions, Philosophies and Ethics at Bath Spa University sends all students who study religions on week-long, usually residential, fieldwork placements in religious (or, more generally, belief) communities. In so doing, it is continuing a practice pioneered in the mid-1970s by Don Whittle and Heather Williamson that was predicated upon the importance of students gaining a fuller and deeper understanding of religions, beyond any religion (or part thereof) in which they were raised or with which they were currently affiliated. This remains the case today and it was to exploit this legacy and explore opportunities to promote this form of learning that Denise Cush and I undertook an HEA-funded project entitled Living Religion, a title chosen both to emphasise that religions are lived out rather than simply matters of belief, and to indicate that students' knowledge of religions is enhanced by sharing in the lives of members of religious communities.

As Don Whittle recalled in an interview with Denise Cush, the inauguration of the programme of fieldwork placements was attributable to the recognition of the distinction between 'talking about religion in the lecture room all the time' and 'experienc[ing] what life is really like in religious communities' (Cush, 2010). While this is clearly the foundational insight informing the placement programme over four decades, certainly some changes have occurred. Chief among these from the pedagogical perspective are the backgrounds and adherence of the students themselves, originally predominantly Christian and quite probably of particular Christian denominations, latterly much more diverse and including many with little or no contact with religions at a practical or personal level. This change in the student intake reflects the phenomenon dubbed by Linda Woodhead as 'the rise of the nones', that is, those who indicate that they are of 'no religion' with the rider that they are by no means necessarily antagonistic towards religion and, on the contrary, may pursue spiritual interests though characteristically eschewing congregational worship and formal membership of religious groups together with deference to religious authority and acceptance of institutional structures (Woodhead, 2016). This trend evident in YouGov surveys but also in British Social Attitudes surveys and, to a lesser extent, in the decennial census is especially marked for younger age groups whereby, in December 2015, 60 % of 18 to 24 year olds identified themselves as of 'no religion' (Woodhead 2016 cf. British Religion in Numbers, 2014; Office for National Statistics, 2012). Even if it possible that Religious Studies students in general or Bath Spa University Religious Studies students in particular diverge in certain respects from the picture of 'the new norm' painted by Linda Woodhead (2016), since the 18 to 24 year old age group dominates the undergraduate

population, this can only serve to strengthen the case for exposing students to religious life in a community setting, often of a strongly hierarchical and highly organised complexion.

Other changes relate to new requirements in respect of research ethics and legal obligations along with risk assessment. Admittedly, many administrative and financial issues are much the same – the viability of the programme in light of the necessity to obtain appropriate placements in host communities and secure the funding to support those communities in providing placements while limiting the cost to students. However, the staff team are convinced that this is worthwhile and student testimony, overwhelmingly, if not unanimously, supports this conclusion.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The placement can be described as a form of experiential learning though not along the philosophical, holistic and systematic lines championed by David Kolb (2015). It is perhaps better seen as an example of experiential learning in the general sense defined by Morris Keeton and Pamela Tate as follows:

> Learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about the realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process.
> (Keeton and Tate, 1978, p. 2)

According to Kolb (2015, p. xviii), this can detract from the intellectual dimension of learning but this is surely not necessarily the case, depending in some measure on how the placement is planned and also assessed. A criticism that may be more to the point is that the placement supplements a conventional curriculum rather than replacing it with an entirely different approach (Kolb, 2015, p. xviii) but again this is not as telling a criticism as it might be were the placement not a compulsory part of the students' pathways. As Graham Harvey (2011, pp. 217-218) has remarked, '[r]eligion … is not properly understood without attention to its fully embodied, materialized, local and varying practice: its vernacular or lived reality'. This does not exclude engagement with other sources of information and interpretive frameworks, albeit with a different agenda, as Harvey (2011, p. 217) acknowledges. Indeed, it is negotiating the relationship between these that constitutes one of the major challenges of fieldwork. In this connection, a helpful typology of the components of religion is set forth by Stephen Gregg and Lynne Scholefield (2015, p. 7) who differentiate between 'reported religion', 'represented religion' and 'living religion' denoting respectively textbook versions of religions, insider accounts of religions, and the reality of religions that diverges markedly from scholarly and official norms. In fieldwork, students are invited to question their prior knowledge of a religion, consider the provenance of what they are told by members of communities and read in

communities' publications, and develop their skills as researchers in researching a particular community at a particular time and in a particular place. Far from minimising the part played by thinking skills, this is a complex and demanding task, and it is one of the reasons, together with a conviction of the value of the encounter and engagement with religions on the ground as integral to a multidisciplinary study of religions, for making the placement compulsory.

The Module

During academic year 2015 to 2016, the placement was located in a third year core module, Studying Religions in the Contemporary World. The purpose of the placement was to offer the opportunity for independent first-hand research, entailing the application of specific methodologies for data capture and analysis informed by ethical sensitivity and legal awareness. It was supported by an introductory section that related major global trends such as modernity and postmodernity, fundamentalism and radicalism, globalisation and diaspora, and pluralism and interfaith encounter to religious communities in Britain. This introductory section was assessed by an essay. The placement was the basis of a research project and a seminar presentation. The former was the more straightforwardly academic aspect of the assessment. It involved identifying a research question, using material gathered from participant-observation and interviews alongside scholarly literature to answer that question. The latter was more reflective in character, asking students to comment on the academic, and where relevant personal, impact of the placement. In preparing for this presentation, students were advised to refer to the module learning outcomes, placement objectives and their own contemporaneous notes in the form of research journals.

This paper addresses the issues raised by the 2015/2016 cohort of students, reviewing their research presentations for their reflections, supplemented by questionnaire responses and five semi-structured interviews on the emerging themes. Thanks are due to the students for their permission to use their work, and especially to those who gave interviews. They undertook placements in a range of communities, encompassing local, regional and national centres. The communities may be independent, aligned with wider movements or affiliates of larger organisations. Although there were no offers of placements from Jewish or Islamic groups, placements were available in Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh communities as well as New Age and Pagan sites. In some cases, these descriptions are questionable, certainly from the perspective of the communities concerned, however, they nevertheless provide some indication of the character and orientation of the communities.

The Familiar and the Strange

Under the circumstances, it could be assumed that there would be little need to make the familiar strange; after all, students are expected to investigate a religious faith and commitment other than their own, if any. Yet there are all kinds of familiarity, one of which is the product of previous academic study. One student commented on this, having studied a specific religion at GCSE and A

level and then again at University, adding that this had not involved encounter with that religion in practice. Thinking about an extensive engagement with the religion in primarily, if not exclusively, conceptual and doctrinal terms, the student declared '[t]hat seems pretty weird' in explaining his decision to opt for placement in that religion. What is of particular relevance is that the placement did make a difference in understanding the religion, casting a new light on the nature of adherence by revealing a progressive development in understanding rather than complete assent to the teachings from the outset.

Another aspect of familiarity relates to the British context and setting. Students may not be going far afield and, even if they are, are only travelling elsewhere in Britain. The juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary, while allowing that the extraordinary for the student is simultaneously the ordinary for members of religious communities, leads to a much deeper appreciation of diversity in a multi-religious nation that goes beyond knowledge that there are various religions present in Britain to a real sense of the extent of that variety. As a student observed on visiting a place of worship of unremarkable appearance located on a city street, '[i]t was like entering a completely different world'.

Where students ask to be placed in a community that belongs to a religion that they do know well, with the rider that the community should evince a markedly different interpretation and expression of that religion (for instance, another Christian denomination) from that they know, the scope of familiarity is greater. Consequently, it could be harder to maintain an academic stance, entailing as it does a measure of critical distance. As one student remarked, 'I had to constantly remind myself I was a researcher' given how impressive and attractive the community appeared. Notwithstanding, the significance of studying a religious community, espousing the same faith as the student's but practising it in what is in some degree an unfamiliar manner, remains considerable.

It is easier to see how the placement involves making the strange familiar. This is not least because religions may pursue a policy of acculturation and assimilation in adapting to the West and gaining Western converts, as others may have done in the past. The imperative to maintain a balance between continuity and change received some scrutiny, though so did the fact a given religion had 'a rich history adapting to new cultures' underlining that adaptation has always been a feature of religious life. What may be striking is where such adaptation is to British norms and values, and an ongoing process.

However, despite what has often been lengthy study of religions, there seems to have been a tendency to think of members of religious communities as other or different that was only identified in retrospect. In a number of ways, this tendency was undermined by the placement. Typical of the reaction to the common humanity that came to the fore was one student who, referring to conversations with monks and nuns, recounted what was called 'an "oh-yeah" moment … they are still people, they have good days and bad days just like the rest of us'. It is probably worth noting that this student had already been on visits to places of worship so perhaps the opportunity for informal discussions, in place of more formal presentations and question and answer sessions, was the crucial factor.

Moreover, the issue of the students' religiosity arises as to whether any religious adherence on an individual student's part favours familiarity over strangeness in enabling that individual to make connections and comparisons. One student said 'I was able to understand better I think because I come from a religion myself', drawing attention to a similar spirit of devotion and dedication without conceding some marked differences and some sensitivities in conforming to ritual requirements.

In summary, the placement entails a tacking between the familiar and the strange, whatever the starting point, combining immersion (that is, participation), insofar as consistent with the integrity and autonomy of the student and the standards and expectations of the community, with detachment (that is, observation and also interviews) in order to conduct research that has academic value. This research is built upon insiders' understandings of themselves and their traditions, employing qualitative methods to produce rich data, in line with an emic approach (Morris, Leung, Ames and Lickel, 1999, Table 1, p. 783).

The Placement Experience

As would be anticipated, students frequently focused on manifestations of religiosity that are not easily conveyed in conventional sources and media. These include aspects of worship and practice, especially when students have participated and not merely attended, where all the senses may be stimulated by the experience. Students reported on types of divination, services held, forms of public witness and proselytising but, most commonly, on meditation. This was mainly Buddhist meditation though students also tried New Age and Pagan meditation. The sheer variety of Buddhist meditation became clear, the different techniques employed by Tibetan and Zen Buddhists making this plain. Irrespective, students' accounts of meditation were extremely positive. One declared meditation to have been 'very eye-opening' and another, perhaps more typically, observed how it rendered the meditator 'calmer and more relaxed as a result'. This probably explains why a number of students indicated that they had continued to meditate on their return to University, mainly to cope with the stresses of the third year both academically and professionally.

For this cohort of students, something else that loomed large was food. (Off the record, I think this may have had something to do with the fact that we had a 11-1 slot for this module with many students having already attended one to two hours of classes and with the prospect of another one to two hours to follow for some.) Of course, food does play a big part in religions, a truth singled out by one student when answering what had been learnt from the placement, and numerous instances were cited by students. Among these instances were making food offerings to deity images, dietary restrictions such as consuming only sattvic foods, and the provision of langar, embodying virtues such as reverence, purity and equality. Acts of charity and service mentioned by students also related to religions' core values of love and hospitality and frequently involved food, notably numerous forms of food distribution to those in need but additionally hosting social occasions centred on meals. More generally, some students evinced surprise at the quality and quantity of the food and, despite one

who 'struggled a huge amount with the food', on the whole there was genuine appreciation for a healthy and tasty diet. Indeed, some students had been involved in cooking for members of the community and the general public among the tasks they performed. It was interesting that one student who seemed less than enthusiastic about a vegetarian diet – 'something which wasn't exactly the worst thing ever for me' – still reported a lasting impact in that 'it did make me think a lot more about what I eat and where it comes from'. This was in all likelihood an unanticipated consequence of the placement.

The Role and Value of Fieldwork

In contrast, one of the areas that students were instructed to address was fieldwork as a research methodology. It is fair to say that not everyone found it rewarding but most did, with quite a few going as far as deeming the placement to be enjoyable and even fun. This is not to say that it was without difficulties. For instance, in respect of interviews, there was sometimes a language barrier (or at least potential interviewees perceived there to be), gender, ethnic and/or age divides, limited time when conversation of any kind was permitted, a tendency to answer questions with other questions, an unwillingness to answer questions at all due to a lack of authority to pronounce on doctrinal issues or the inappropriateness of discussing personal histories once a new religious life had begun. Apart from problems posed by the modes of assessment, apparently the research project with the requirement to include data analysis was an extremely complicated and rigorous form of assessment, fieldwork does involve academic issues and ethical responsibilities.

Encouragingly, such considerations were reflected upon at length. The consequences of being one's own research instrument in a community, and the attendant imperative to be reflexive and responsive, were noted. Reference was made to Confirmation Bias, the bias towards data that coheres with the researcher's theory and against data that challenges it (Barrett, 2011, p. 168), and also the Hawthorne Effect, the changes in the conduct of those being researched as a direct result of the research being conducted (Seale, 2012, p. 571). These key concepts are relevant to the authenticity and validity of the research, while others have a more direct bearing on the relationships with communities and the welfare of their members. The concerns, negatively, to avoid giving offence and, positively, to observe etiquette which were mentioned are key to '[r]especting the dignity and integrity of others' (Bird and Scholes, 2011, p. 88). Similarly, students revisited the content of workshops on research ethics where the topics of power and harm, confidentiality and anonymity, and openness and informed consent were covered (e.g. Bryman, 2012, pp. 135-144), now having had to apply these principles in real life and not always finding it easy.

Even if fieldwork did mean being conscious of these considerations and working through University policies and processes, the main benefit of fieldwork in the students' opinions was that they learnt so much about the religion with which the community was, however equivocally or loosely, associated. This was the conclusion reached by students who had studied that religion for some time as well by those with much less knowledge. In support of this judgement, students

drew attention to diversity within religions and the ability to hear voices that may otherwise be marginalised or silenced. One shared a realisation that the strength of religious identity could in reality be disaggregated from the grasp of religious teaching. Another stressed the fundamental truth that there are people whose whole lives are centred on their religion and who repose their trust in its tenets. In turn, this led some to think about one of the module learning outcomes, 'consider alternative approaches to life and work underpinned by religious perspectives', since the communities lived according to religious beliefs and sought to support themselves in a manner consistent with those values.

To pick up on the conference theme, 'Religion Beyond the Textbook', many students commented upon the difference between reading about religions and researching them in the field. As one student stated, '[w]e are so used to reading holy texts or reading academic material and studying these religions in the classroom, but it can be so different to experience them first-hand'. Building upon this direct encounter, another linked the contrasting learning opportunities – '[r]eading the book is one thing, but it comes alive and feels real when you are actually experiencing it' – with the role of the researcher – '[it f]eels like you get to experience what "real" researchers do when they write the books that I read'. This recognition that students are doing what academics do is important as it is a major advantage of fieldwork in that it is empowering, for all that it demands initiative, confidence and persistence along with good interpersonal skills, sensitivity and self-awareness.

Conclusion

To emphasise the role and value of fieldwork is not, however, to attack textbooks; after all, they can be very good and may themselves be informed by and integrate fieldwork. However, as one student pointed out, religions are dynamic and for this reason 'what you read in books is only a guideline as to what the religious community might actually practise'. Students do get a lot from the placement, personally as well as professionally, one deeming the placement to have been 'quite honestly one of the best weeks of my life.' In the longer term, given that so many students go into teaching, it can also promote an educational philosophy that values the lived reality of religions as it has for an alumnus, Chris Selway, who leads Religious Education in a primary school where trips and visitors are prioritised and whose Farmington Scholarship has been devoted to promoting children's encounter with that reality as a vital part of Religious Education (Robinson, undated).

Consequently, placements contribute towards Adam Dinham's laudable aim, 'a proper engagement with cutting-edge data and theory that reveal a real religious landscape'; at the same time, they contest his stereotyping of Religious Studies in universities and, incidentally and indirectly, Religious Education in schools as focussed on some imaginary, reified and essentialised counterpart of the diffuse and diverse reality (Dinham, 2015, p. 3). My colleagues' papers will do likewise.

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