

# **THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH METHODS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

This is the first comprehensive survey in English of research methods in the field of religious studies. It is designed to enable non-specialists and students at upper undergraduate and graduate levels to understand the variety of research methods used in the field. The aim is to create awareness of the relevant methods currently available and to stimulate an active interest in exploring unfamiliar methods, encouraging their use in research and enabling students and scholars to evaluate academic work with reference to methodological issues. A distinguished team of contributors cover a broad spectrum of topics, from research ethics, hermeneutics and interviewing, to Internet research and video-analysis. Each chapter covers practical issues and challenges, the theoretical basis of the respective method, and the way it has been used in religious studies (illustrated by case studies).

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*Edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler*

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# PREFACE

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*Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler*

## **Why this book?**

The introductory essay explains why we think that research methods and methodologies are crucial for the future of the study of religion\'. We find it symptomatic of the state of affairs in our discipline that this *Handbook* is the first volume on research methods in the study of religion\' ever published in English. In the introduction we suggest some hypothetical explanations for this curious and embarrassing neglect.

When faculty at one of our departments (Stausberg's) decided to split the customary graduate-level theory and methods course into two separate courses, the lack of relevant literature in English became obvious. (Fortunately, two colleagues had just edited a volume in Norwegian.) One of the aims of this particular course on research methods is to help students to prepare the ground for their research dissertations (which play a relatively great role in the Norwegian graduate programmes). We hope that the present volume will stimulate the development of similar courses.

Neither of the editors can, nor wishes to, claim to have started this editorial project as an expert in methodological affairs, but preparing this volume has definitely helped us to improve and we have learned a lot. We are grateful to all contributors for sharing their expertise and for their patience in dealing with our various queries and requests for revision, which were typically meant to make technical points clearer to novices (like ourselves). We now hope that others, not least graduate students, will take part in this learning process. We sincerely feel that this may indeed be of critical importance for the further development of our discipline.

Neither of us had the benefit of extensive training in research methods as part of our education in the study of religion\'. In that sense, our own careers are symptomatic of the lack that this volume is meant to begin to address. In other ways, our backgrounds are somewhat atypical. We share an interest in the suspect domains of theory and metatheory, be it theories of religion, theories of ritual, or the importance of philosophies of language and meaning for the study of religion\'. At the same time, we belong to an even more exotic sub-species: theoreticians who are also committed to empirical research. We also share six more specific characteristics. We do historical and field-based work. We work on early modern European religious history and on non-European religions (Zoroastrianism in India and Iran; spirit-possession religions in Brazil). We are concerned with the importance of theoretical models in the study of these religions. We find ourselves traversing boundaries between the histories of specific religions, the history of studies of these religions and the study of religion\' in general (including its theoretical legacies). We both enjoy navigating academic discourses in different languages—a tendency reflected in the multinational authorship of this book. Last, but not least, as v

explain in our joint introduction, we believe that methods mark the middle ground between theory and 'data'—and so our exploring methods in greater detail seemed a natural step. In addition, we both have experience with the collegial give-and-take that is involved in co-editing and co-authoring, including our having previously engaged in both these activities together.

Our own standpoint can be described as collaborative, critical, reflexive and reasonably conservative though open-minded. We have, of course, not engaged personally in more than a handful of the methods represented in this book; so far, for example, neither of us has done experimental work nor conducted engaged, committed or activist research, though we see value in both approaches. As scholars of religion we wish to retain a certain distance from religious discourses, but we are aware that the scholarly and the non-scholarly discourses are densely interwoven and that (we as) scholars of religion are not only observers but invariably actors on the religious field; moreover we don't indulge ourselves in the illusion that our views are any less ideological or value-free than those of others.

If some methods are not covered in the present *Handbook*, this is not because we wanted to create a canon and exclude other options. The inevitable lacunae are the result of a combination of our own limited perspectives, constraints on space and time, and our inability to find authors in cases where we would have liked to include additional chapters. To our eyes, there are no inherently good or bad methods or methodologies, but there are better or worse options relative to given theoretical stances, research questions and sources. Even if there are no inherently good or bad methods, there are differences in quality and productivity when methods are actually put to use—and we hope that this *Handbook* will help to improve these and to stimulate creativity in the discipline. We believe also that it is important to choose theoretical stances in an informed manner and to be critical and reflexive towards these. We envision scholarship that is transparent in method, dense in theory, rich in data, and clear in presentation/writing.

Work on this *Handbook* went off surprisingly smoothly. Apart from a single chapter that did not materialize, all the authors delivered their pieces on time or within reasonable limits, and all were very tolerant with our suggested editorial changes. Their collective collaboration is more than just greatly appreciated. Our editorial efforts established a plan and laid a foundation, but their work makes up the edifice that you see before you.

Michael Stausberg  
Steven Englund

# Methodology

# INTRODUCTION

## Research methods in the study of religion\

*Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler*

It is generally agreed that **methods**, together with **theories**, **concepts** and **categories**,<sup>1</sup> are foundational for modern science: knowledge accepted as ‘scientific’ must be based on empirical materials (**data**) gathered by using methods that are accepted as ‘scientific’, and their analysis must proceed following rules based on ‘scientific’ methods by engaging concepts and theories accepted by the respective academic community. Scholars’ dreams, for example, are not accepted as scientific data; allegorical interpretation of such dreams is not accepted as a scientific method; illumination is not generally accepted as a scientific category; and astrology is not accepted as a scientific theory.<sup>2</sup> Of course, rules for what qualifies as scientific data, methods, categories and theories are subject to change. The discussions and critiques that motivate such change are a basic task of scholarship. In addition, scientific data, findings and theories are constantly challenged by non-scholars. Conversely, the borderlines between what is science and what is non-science, or pseudo-science, are matters of ongoing debate and negotiation.

The past decades have seen vivid debates about conceptual and theoretical issues in the study of religion\'. The very concept of ‘religion’ has been challenged as a valid theoretical category. Feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, philosophy of language, evolutionary theory, the cognitive sciences and other intellectual developments have raised a number of epistemological, semantic and methodological issues (i.e. questions regarding the nature of knowledge construction, foundations and production of knowledge and meaning); there has been a wave of new theories of religion (Stausberg 2009). So far, however, these debates have remained curiously distant from issues of methodology.

### **The neglect of method in the study of religion\**

Issues of research methods are seldom addressed at conferences. Very few articles on methods have been published by leading journals, even in the one that has ‘method’ in its title.<sup>3</sup> Methods are rarely discussed in introductory textbooks<sup>4</sup> and separate courses on research methods are seldom included in religious studies programs.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the study of religion\ stands in marked contrast to other disciplines, which put great emphasis on training in research methods—often in the first year—and which have a strong record of published work on methods, including journal articles, handbooks and specialist volumes. There are no discussions in the study of religion\ that can compete with the level of technical sophistication established in many other disciplines.<sup>6</sup> The present volume is intended as

significant step toward putting research methods more firmly on the agenda of the study of religion, especially for graduate students.

There are several reasons for the general neglect of research methods in the study of religion. A major one is the fragmentary situation of our research landscape, in which some scholars learn textual methods while others become familiar with qualitative social inquiry as part of their training. This relates to the often-heard claim that the study of religion is different from other disciplines because it has no research methods of its own. The fact that the field has no *sui generis* methods is true, and obviously so: almost no discipline does. The analysis of compositions in music comes to mind as a distinct method, but even the study of music uses a range of common methods such as historiography and source criticism or fieldwork. All academic disciplines use a wide variety of methods, most of which they share with others. Fieldwork has never been the exclusive domain of anthropology, and sociologists are not the only scholars who conduct surveys. It is therefore a misconception to think that the study of religion is significantly different from other disciplines in its use of a variety of methods; what is different is the scarcity of explicit reflection on methods in the study of religion.

Conversely, one often hears that the study of religion is a multi- or pluri-methodological discipline. Again, this amounts to merely stating the obvious. How could it be otherwise? Given the complex nature of most of the things, facts or affairs that are studied in the humanities and the social sciences, there simply are no disciplines that could afford to rely on one method only. There is, in fact, a general consensus (at least outside of the study of religion) that different methods should, where possible, be combined in order to achieve stronger results. A multi- or pluri-methodological approach is far from an anomaly. What is anomalous is the implicit conclusion derived from this insight, namely that issues of methods do not require attention (because there is no one method anyway). Actually, unless one mistakenly identifies **methodological pluralism** with methodological *laissez-faire* and dilettantism or with the belief that all methods are equally good for all purposes, one would anticipate precisely the opposite conclusion: that the challenge of having to work with and train students in a variety of different research methods requires substantial and explicit attention and commitment to issues of research methods. Given the nature of the discipline of the study of religion, then, we would expect to find a deep and abiding interest in training students in methodology, in refining research methods and in methodological creativity. This is clearly not the case. Rather, method use in the study of religion continues to be relatively unsophisticated and surprisingly uniform. It is time for this to change. For a relatively well-established discipline such as the study of religion, it is more than a little embarrassing that the present volume appears to be the first handbook of research methods ever published in English.<sup>7</sup>

## Methods

As indicated above, the present volume starts from the basic assumption that methods are the rules of the game in scholarly work. Resonating the Greek etymology of the word (from *meta* ‘after’ and *odos* ‘way’), the concept is understood here as a metaphor to refer to a (planned) ‘way’, a specific way of doing things, an organized procedure. A scientific method, in very broad terms, is the generally accepted mode of procedure in the sciences in a broader sense (including the humanities). In the light of theories, methods construct, collect and/or generate the data for scholarly work. Data are not simply ‘out there’, independent of the observer and the observation. There are no data without methods and theories. Methods help us to analyze reality but, at the same time, they, in part, produce the data that are to be analyzed. In that sense, by partially producing the realities they then go about to analyze, methods are performative (Law 2004: 143). Methods, and the concepts that inform them and describe them, also have a history, changing across scholarly generations (see Platt 1999: 44–52). The goal of

this volume is to give a sense of current methods and discussions of method in the study of religion's. It is clear that some methods are more helpful than others (for given purposes and within given contexts), that different types of scholarly work make more productive use of some methods than others, and that all methods impose limited perspectives and select empirical materials (data). The obvious facts, however, do not make methods dispensable, for there is no scholarly (or scientific) work without method(s). This should not be misunderstood as saying that there is one special method that guarantees success, that following a method guarantees success, that methods are beyond critique or that established scientific methods are the only way of obtaining relevant knowledge (though scientific methods are the only generally recognized way of obtaining *scientific* knowledge). Methods are not a straitjacket; they allow for creativity and new vision. Not everything can be planned out, of course, and not every plan can be put into practice. In fact, scholarly work is often steered more by external constraints, by improvisation and by *bricolage* than by a master plan. While methodological competence will yield solid work, brilliant work is often the result of serendipity. Creative scholarly work does not go against method, but creatively uses methods; as all good tools, methods are refined in use: some wear out and are replaced by others; some are broadened or reoriented in light of their limitations or when facing the threat of perceived methodological hegemony or imperialism (Larson, 2004).

In a formal sense, research methods are techniques for collecting and analyzing, or enacting (Larson, 2004) data in scientific or scholarly research. While there is always some degree of improvisation, these procedures or techniques typically follow a plan, a routine or a scheme. These established procedures should not be misunderstood as immutable laws, but as guidelines and examples of established or best practice (which is not to deny the dynamism of practices). Accordingly, the present volume does not intend to regulate or standardize research practice in the study of religion's but to improve research and to stimulate its further development by providing reflection and suggesting alternatives.

## Some key methodological issues

The application and discussion of the underlying principles of these procedures is called methodology. **Methodology** refers both to general technical issues regarding methods (i.e., case or sample selection, data collection and analysis), and to the theory and conceptualization of methods. We will address each of these in turn.

### *Research design*

The first, technical sense of 'methodology' incorporates several issues: e.g. research design; relations and tensions between qualitative and quantitative methods; selection of methods; and means of validating results, including the use of different methods in conjunction.

Research design is covered in a separate chapter in this volume (see [Chapter 1.5](#)). Here we will confine ourselves to listing some of the basic steps involved in effective research design.<sup>8</sup>

- Identifying the core research question or problem and the series of specific questions and hypotheses that will investigate, support or elaborate that core issue (What is the goal of the study? What lacuna is it meant to fill? What motivates the desire to generate knowledge on this particular issue? What more specific issues will serve as stepping stones to generating this knowledge?).
- Reviewing the relevant literature (What has been published that is comparable in terms

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