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# THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE CZECH LANDS—DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC STUDIES OF RELIGIONS

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to summarize some of the experiences and methodological insights gained from research on non-traditional religious groups that the author has conducted over the last twenty years, primarily in Czech society. The starting point for these studies is respect for the principle that it is not possible to approach the study of religious pluralism and diversity from a single predetermined conceptual framework—religious diversity requires diverse approaches. However, within the diversity approach there exist some common principles such as respect for the religious beliefs of respondents and the elimination of personal stereotypes and ethnocentrism.

**Key words:** Religious diversity; religious pluralism; qualitative research; religious minorities; reflexivity in research

## Introduction

Modernity has several important constitutional elements, which include openness (open-mindedness, the tendency to change) and plurality. In other words, in its current phase modern society (which can be described as postmodern society or reflexive society) emerges from the principle of the radical recognition of diversity, the collapse of the power monopoly on the legitimacy of "grand narratives" and the assertion of the right to be different.

In the context of "Western society," this trend is particularly evident in the realm of religious life, where there has been a breach in the legitimacy of the "mono-myth" connected with the power and discursive domination of one form of religion, and the emergence of a relatively free religious marketplace, and where a large number of religious organizations compete with one another. The very existence of religious pluralism has many consequences, such as changes in the behaviour of individual religious bodies (the growing emphasis on including marketing practices and strategies, the necessity of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue on one hand and increasing fundamentalism on the other, etc.), as well as a change in the cognitive disposition of individual believers (religious pluralism leads to a weakening of faith in "one truth," a strengthening of religious, ontological uncertainty and a disruption of individual and group religious identity).

The existence of religious plurality and diversity (or the legitimacy of religious difference) also has implications for the academic study of religion. This article attempts to summarize experiences from research on religious diversity and indicate some principles which researchers in the field of (qualitative) research on religion should take into account. These principles, however, concern most areas of qualitative research (religions are "simply" specific areas of research).

From the very beginning, every researcher (not only the researcher in the field of religion) who enters the complicated field of social research encounters the issue of values and the value orientation of the researcher him/herself. In fact, this issue consists of three areas. The first is the particular value orientation of the researcher as an individual who has undergone a particular type of socialization and enculturation in which he/she has adopted a particular world view, which includes the personal value orientation which he/she more or less holds to (or does not hold to) in his/her daily life. The second area is the ethical requirements of academic work itself acquired by the individual during his/her studies and subsequent scientific career and which is common to all academic disciplines (such as correctly citing other authors and not presenting other people's ideas as their own). The third area is a set of specific values or principles inherent in specific academic disciplines, which researchers from other disciplines do not have to deal with.

This article deals with the third and first of these areas, which are closely related to and directly connected to the quality of so-called qualitative research in the social sciences. In this type of research, unlike research on "inanimate" nature, the attitudes and life experiences of the individual researcher are in fact quite sharply manifest. I am deeply convinced that the quality of qualitative social science research directly depends on the life experiences and value orientation of the individual researchers, and that at the same time, it is true that life experiences and a deep (theoretical and practical) knowledge of the methodology and theory can contribute positively to the reflexive creation of this value orientation (including transformation occurring during the process of primary socialization).

The following article is an attempt to reflect on experiences up to the present day from field research conducted among religious minorities and to convey these experiences to both professionals and the wider public. The author began researching religious minorities in 1990, when it became possible to research various forms of religious life freely without ideological bias. At that time a large number of religious groups from a large number of religious traditions began to operate in the Czech lands, and it became necessary to describe this situation in a professional way. The author of the current article began to empirically research non-traditional religions and to varying degrees over the subsequent twenty years has spent time with members of the Hare Krishna movement, Czech Buddhists, Scientologists, followers of the Reverend Moon, UFO devotees and followers of the Universe People, and healers, but also with Buddhists and shamans in Siberia as well as Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Muslims in India.

This list is provided for a single reason: during all of these twenty years spent in the company of a wide variety of religious groups from different religious traditions, as a researcher I have dealt with (and still deal with) the same problem, which is connected with the values in social scientific research and the choice of research strategies (which are, however, derived from particular basic values). Moreover, unlike other social groups,

religious minorities or non-traditional religious groups have certain specific features which highlight the importance of values and their reflexivity. I therefore believe that the following list of problem areas may be inspiring and beneficial to those who are not directly engaged in research on religion.

**Problem 1: Religiosity of actors/respondents versus the non-religious character of science**

Science and religion are different discourses with different principles and goals; thanks to their historical development and some contemporary conflicts they are, however, often seen as competitors. A classic example is the open conflict over different images of the world in the debate on creationism (currently in the form of so-called intelligent design) on one side and evolution on the other. The conflict between religion (in its various forms, which combine the idea of superhuman powers which are worthy of active human worship) and science (in its various forms, which combine the notion of a rational interpretation of the empirical world in which there is no place for non-empirical existence) is always present and in various parts of the world and cultures still takes on various forms. It always, however, takes on the character of an ontological "dispute about truth."

In field research this tension manifests itself for example in the "misunderstanding" over the meaning of scientific research and particular empirical investigations on the part of the respondents/actors. Actors are often deeply convinced that science (the academic study of religions) cannot study religion, or, if it can, then it can study only secondary themes and human affairs. In their view, religion deals with "divine revelation," "God" or "higher transcendental principles" and this is what all human effort should strive for. Academic study of religions (science, or sociology and anthropology) however, does not contribute to the understanding of God or transcendence, and therefore, from the perspective of believers, its activities are not important and are not of much value. Specifically, then, this attitude shows up in their unwillingness to participate in research, or in attempts to preach to and "lecture" the investigator about the "real value" of things, or in limiting the respondent to providing unimportant information.

Understanding these barriers relates to the researcher's ability to respect the worldview of respondents and to be aware of the seriousness of the topic for the respondents. If we understand that religion is based on the concept of universal order (as opposed to chaos) which acts as a "model of the world" and as a "model for the world," that it creates strong and lasting emotions, provides a strong powerful basis for personal and group identity and offers the world as a whole as well as the individual a meaningful life (Geertz 2000), then it is possible to "understand" the perspective of the respondents and "understand" their distrust of the importance of social-scientific research on religion. "Understanding," however, does not mean abandoning the autonomy of science in the formulation of research questions and research objectives.

In the Czech context, this problem is connected with the generally secular environment (Lužný, Navrátilová 2001),which on one hand detracts from the topic of religion in the eyes of the majority of the Czech population and on the other hand strengthens the feeling of threat among believers regardless of denomination (both majority and minority) (Lužný

2008; Váně 2012). The result of this is that a large proportion of the population does not want to answer questions about their religious convictions at all or responds with great dismay and distrust when asked about their religious life.

**Problem 2: Emic versus etic approach, theoretical and conceptually unanchored research**

Although a large portion of the Czech population consists of "non-believers," there is respect for the topic of religion in general and for believers among social science researchers. While researchers do not have any great problem asking questions about respondents' intimate sex lives (such as the number of times a respondent has had sex with his wife in the last month, the number of times he had sex with his mistress in the last week or his personal attitude to masturbation), the issue of religious life evokes far greater shyness in the researcher. Due to a wide range of circumstances, religion has become an issue which is considered far more personal than sex. Although a researcher can easily ask about the frequency with which a respondent attends religious services, about issues of religious substance (what one believes, how someone obtained their faith, what religion means to them, how a person's faith affects his/her life, etc.), researchers are far more cautious and are satisfied with very general answers which would not be considered satisfactory if offered in relation to other areas of the respondent's life. For example, answers of the type "religion is absolutely vital and essential to my life" would satisfy a researcher, while answers of the type "sex is absolutely vital and essential to my life" would more likely invoke curiosity in the interviewer and lead him or her to ask further questions.

This respect and shyness thus leads to a preference for the emic perspective, which is further enhanced by insufficient theoretical and conceptual equipment. This applies particularly to qualitative research on religion, where a number of novice researchers feel that they are entering totally unexamined terrain and that they are interested in issues that are very intimate, which current science(the academic study of religions) has been unable to express due to its narrowness. Often they have the feeling that they are "pioneers" for whom on one hand everything is possible (in terms of traditional research on religion, which in their eyes does not yet exist) and are obliged to respect the world of their respondents. The excessive emphasis on the emic perspective may be not a consequence of respect for respondents and the subject of our research, but much more a result of our inadequacy in terms of theory, the conceptualization of theme and in the history of research up to the present.

On the other hand, it is clear that the emic perspective is inherent in social-scientific research on religion; but that cannot mean abandoning the etic perspective. Limiting oneself to the emic perspective would in reality result in only a partial reproduction of the respondent's world. The goal of science is to build a theory or theories; these, however, cannot be built completely using an emic perspective, but must be constructed by means of their own scientific terminology and according to their own scientific structures. These, quite understandably, need not coincide with the perspectives of the respondents.

Although this question is far more complicated, I will try to demonstrate this problem by using the example of scientific writing about the activities of the Hare Krishna. Would the reader understand this article (as a member of a broad social-scientific community) if I wrote

that the devotees dedicate a large portion of their days to "japaing" or singing "bhadjan." Or, in the case of Shinto, should I diligently use the term "kami" (for example for designating Mount Fuji) or the word "god" even though the western meaning of the word "god" does not have the same meaning as the Japanese word "kami" (cf. e.g. Havlíček 2011)? Examples of research on cultures other than one's own clearly illustrate the problem of succumbing to the emic perspective. If we conduct research into lesbians or workers at orphanages, there is not a significant problem with using the emic perspective, because we are still moving in more or less the same cultural and linguistic environment.

On the other hand, accepting an etic perspective cannot mean simply reproducing the cultural colonial imperialism of (western) science, which, with its demand for the formulation of general theories and a generalizing categorical apparatus, takes part in the discursive (and subsequently also political and economic) domination over the "Others" or "others"(cf. e.g. Said 1978).

**Problem 3: Encounters with the unexpected**

Research on religion offers an extraordinary adventure consisting of encounters with an entirely unexpected world of people who may even be our immediate neighbours. Meetings with these "different" people (the "Others") lead the researcher to attempt to reveal their world and understand it, or rather to understand the behaviour of these people. In this way research on religious minorities in our own society is reminiscent of the adventures of the first cultural anthropologists.

In researching religious ideas and the lives of our neighbours who at first glance are no different from our other neighbours (they go to work, spend money, drive cars, have children, their clothes may not be any different, etc.) we may learn that in many respects they live in a different world, or rather that they see the world around us in a very different way. For example, in doing research we may be surprised that our neighbours (Krishna devotees) are entirely convinced that people have never walked on the Moon, or in fact that walking on the Moon is impossible because the Moon is a spiritual planet which is farther away than the sun, d would be impossible to reach in a mere physical spaceship. These believers simply have a completely different image of the order of the universe (cosmology) than the society around them and assert that so-called space exploration is just a scam.

Another neighbour has no need to argue with the image of outer space as described in modern science (and as it is taught to children in school), but is convinced that a giant war is raging in space between the forces of Evil (or the "forces of darkness") and Good or Light (which incidentally is a common religious belief) and that the planet Earth is important in this battle and is now in grave danger because it is ruled by "black t-shirts" or "reptilians." Fortunately, an evacuation fleet is orbiting the planet, and is ready to intervene and save a small portion of the human race. Of course, the only ones to be saved will be those who believe this prophecy and change their lives in accordance with this message from space and thus begin to break down the "Pseudo-Energy-Dark Forces Information System" (cf. Lužný 2004a, 51-60).

The researcher learns about yet another form of religiosity from another neighbour who tries to convince the researcher that even he/she is a reservoir of limitless energy and recommends daily repetition of the prayer:

> Money is dear to my heart. I love it. I use it for wise and good purposes. I am glad to give it away generously, and it magically returns to me in great quantities from all directions. With its help, I will be able to learn many good and useful things, and, therefore, I am also grateful for my material and spiritual treasures.

Upon parting, the respondent gave the researcher this good advice (for free):

> Repeat this assertion every day and write it in gold letters: 'I am in union with the infinite wealth of my subconscious. I have true prosperity, luck and success. Money flows to me in abundance from inexhaustible sources. Every moment I realize my true value. With all I can and all I have, I will gladly serve my neighbor. I have received rich blessings in the form of material goods. Life is great' (Murphy 1993, 119-123).

Thus positively inclined, the researcher sets off to other respondents and discovers that he/she is in essence a spiritual being (a so-called Thetan) and should try to rid his reactive mind of the "engrams" that block the development of all his/her abilities and cause psychosomatic problems. Regular "auditing" may help in this, as may a certain way of life which includes avoiding all kinds of drugs. Thus he/she is able to acquire abilities which currently seem extraordinary to him/her and also live happily and harmoniously (e.g. Hubbart 1997; cf. Lužný 2004a, 30-36).

At the end of the day the researcher heads for his/her last respondents only to learn from them that neither Adam (the first man) nor Jesus (the second Adam) was able to complete the task which God sent them into the world to do. Their goal was to create the perfect family as the basis for the kingdom of heaven on earth. But Eve was seduced by the fallen angel Lucifer and Jesus was unable to find a wife. Nevertheless, currently there is a Third Adam on earth who will fulfil God's will (*Božím princip* 1998; cf. Lužný 2004a, 36-41).

If during his/her work the researcher encounters such different religious beliefs and believers who are firmly convinced about the uniqueness and correctness of their faith, he/she finds him/herself in an awkward situation. On one hand, the researcher should maintain respect for the respondents, but on the other hand he/she may be uncomfortably confronted with ideas which might seem bizarre and incomprehensible. In this situation the researcher should be grateful and use these ideas properly, because they offer an exceptional opportunity for the researcher to reflect on his/her own ethnocentrism. One of the questions one can ask is: Why are we (as researchers) willing to respect some ideas from some groups and not others.

**Problem 4: Who is right?**

These problem areas are related to the question every researcher comes across sooner or later while doing fieldwork. If one stays in the field long enough and obtains the trust of the respondents, the researcher begins to be perceived as an expert in that particular field and will be asked for his/her expert opinion in the context of the respondents' religious beliefs. Here again we meet with two different worlds and perspectives—religious faith and the science (academic study) of religions. It is obvious that respondents do not expect an expert opinion which would question their faith. Rather, they expect scientific support for their own beliefs.

These may not concern "minor matters," such as whether or not man walked on the moon. From the perspective of the researcher, however, the matter being discussed might not be particularly important (e.g. regarding the religious identity of the respondent). As an illustrative example, let us consider the question of the authenticity and origin of the Hare Krishna movement. The researcher who examines the history of this movement in the Czech lands (and in the West in general) and the reasons why Czechs join this group need not deal with this question, and considering the theme of the research it is entirely irrelevant; nonetheless, even Czech Krishna devotees take pride in the uniqueness and authenticity of their tradition. Should a researcher really say that in his/her opinion this movement did not emerge until the end of the 19th century and that the movement is not the "original" religion of India, but a consequence of the modernization of India bearing elements of the Anglican morality of colonial officials and carrying distinctive features of Protestantism? (See e.g. Fujda, Lužný 2010).

Here, of course, it is true that the researcher is not in the field in order to instruct the respondents and interfere excessively with "reality" or "the terrain." But if asked should he/she remain silent, prevaricate, refuse to answer or respond according to his/her best professional opinion? Those who are firmly convinced of the need for fundamental openness and "fairness" in field research have a clear answer. Personally, however, I am not convinced of the necessity of such an ethical fundamentalism and attempt from the very beginning to establish the kind of relationship with the respondents where they do not ask this type of question.

**Problem 5: The world view of the researcher**

It is not possible here to discuss the significance of the value orientation of the researcher and the influence his/her world view has on the design and process of research. We might perhaps just recommend a classic piece of writing by Max Weber (1998a) and suggest that the reader pay close attention to the fact that in many places Weber uses quotation marks when he writes about "value neutrality," just as he does in another work (Weber 1998b) when writing about "objectivity."

Peter Berger briefly and clearly described this problem when he explained the required "unencumbered value" of sociology:

> this statement certainly does not mean that the sociologist has or should have no values. In any case, it is just about impossible for a human being to exist with no values at all .... The sociologist will normally have many values as a citizen, a private person, a member of a religious group or as an adherent of some other association of people. But within the limits of his activities as a sociologist there is one fundamental value—only that of scientific integrity. Even there, of course, the sociologist, being human, will have to reckon with his convictions, emotions and prejudices. But it is a part of his intellectual training that he tries to understand and control these as bias that ought to be eliminated, as far as possible, from his work (Berger 2003, 13).

In today's age of intellectual laziness Weber's and Berger's challenge often goes unheard. At the same time, it expresses the most basic principle of scientific work, which is critical

reflexivity. A part of this is the critical reflexive analysis of one's own values and world view and the analysis of these positions in one's own thinking on the topic under investigation. The researcher cannot dispense with this obligation simply by acknowledging this at the beginning of the work (e.g. "I am a Catholic," I am a Buddhist," "I am a lesbian," etc.) and thus have the feeling that he/she can write almost anything without the need for critical reflection on his/her own value orientation.

In addition, I am convinced that the requirements of critical reflexivity are essentially part of a particular world view, and these lie at the very foundations of social scientific research on culture (including religion). On this basis we have respect for cultural diversity and the value of cultural plurality. In this way, social-scientific research is part of the postmodern situation. Put differently (and more openly): the ideological basis for the academic study of religion is the liberal principle of religious freedom, and this respect for religious pluralism.

If we see the ways of looking at non-traditional religions from this perspective, then from the liberal position these religions are seen as "minority religions" and as a component of plurality diversity and socio-cultural change. Clearly human rights and the emphasis on the right to be different reveals itself in this context. In contrast, from the conservative position new religions will be seen as threats to current traditions, an expression of postmodern disorder and loss of "values." Religious minorities thus become an example of general danger and a threat to human culture.

**Problem 6: "Favoritism" of the weaker**

The consequence of this position is that there are various forms of (primarily discursive) preferences and "favoritism." Religious minorities (like all minorities) are then examined as groups who do not have equal access to certain rights and opportunities, and are therefore constrained in comparison with other similar (in many cases religious) groups. The minority character of these groups can manifest itself in many ways, but the most significant "restrictions" in the current religious environment in the Czech Republic are evident in two areas. The first is the legal status of their operations, i.e. the unequal approach of the state in the area of state registration and financing—current legislation means that religious minorities cannot obtain the same rights as groups which have already been registered (Lužný 2004b). The second is then the dominant social discourse that defines the "normal" perception of these groups, the "normal" attitudes towards these groups and the "normal" information about them. Put simply: in the dominant social discourse the vast majority of non-traditional religious groups are perceived as "dangerous sects" from which it is necessary to protect both individuals and the society as a whole (Lužný 2004b). The most dangerous "sects" were perceived to be members of the Hare Krishna society and the followers of Reverend Moon, followed by Scientologists. Recently, this stereotype has focused primarily on Muslims (see, e.g. Topinka 2010; Lužný 2011).

If, however, the basic starting point for examining religious groups is liberal tolerance and the value of religious plurality, then an awareness of inequality and the minority character of non-traditional religious groups leads the researcher to reflective or non-reflective "favoritism of the weak" or "heuristic siding with the weaker." The sociology of religion is then depicted as a "defense of sects," which it certainly is not (Lužný 2010).

The question remains, however, as to the nature and degree to which the researcher "sides with the weaker." If we are aware of this siding and it is based on openly expressed values and methodological principles which are acceptable to the scientific community, then the "balancing" perspective is defensible within the context of this discourse of the particular community. This, however, is a reflexive position in which it is true that, unlike in the situation of the dominant discourse, this position leads to the researcher "siding with the weaker."

**Problem 7: Entering public space**

If the researcher examines religious minorities, that is groups that the society around them perceives as incomprehensible and bizarre, he/she will sooner or later encounter media interest. Here it is necessary to realize that the media are not interested in the scholar's objective view, but need the researcher only as a provider of "expert knowledge" which might legitimize the preconceived notions of the journalists, editors, or publishers. The expert is not in the media in order to provide his/her professional opinion and reveal the results of scientific analysis, but to add legitimacy to the article, TV report or other media presentation in question. He/she is a tool of the media and thus becomes part of the dominant discourse.

The question then is whether the researcher can say he/she really thinks at all. Should the researcher discuss findings about which the journalist has no idea, and which would cause a scandal if they were to become public, since every group (including religious ones) has its excesses conflicts, failures and abuses? Openness and honesty in the media do not pay. Moreover, research findings are primarily intended for the academic community, which knows how to deal with this information, and in addition to this the honesty of the researcher can lead to an irreversible loss of trust with the respondents.

In my opinion, the only possible way to work with the media is to adopt their strategies and approaches and to use the media as an instrument for influencing the dominant discourse and popularizing the scientific field. The danger of this position is the possibility that the media will lose interest; it is also, however, always possible that the media will find a more willing expert who, with the joy of self-centred emotion, will allow the media to manoeuvre him/her in the direction they want.

**Problem 8: Level of cooperation**

Qualitative field research most often (but not always) requires the establishment of mutual trust, which in the case of religion, due to its intimate character, is often more difficult. If it is possible to establish mutual trust (which can sometimes take several years), another problem arises because mutual trust can take on the form of mutual obligation. Mutual trust in its ideal form means a relationship of equality, but that can never occur. However, a relationship can be more or less open, in which case the researcher and respondent become somewhat closer and an attempt at mutual understanding emerges on both sides.

This new situation may include certain expectations held by the researcher, such as an expectation of mutual assistance. This may manifest itself in the expectation of a more

positive interpretation of the group or even the expectation of an open public defence. One such requirement may be a demand for the right to approve the publication of the researcher's opinions on the website belonging to the group of active participation (in the form of a lecture) at one of the group's events.

Even here, as in the previous cases, it is appropriate to question the degree of cooperation, because exceeding a certain threshold may lead to the researcher's loss of independence. But where is the border between cooperation and independence? The researcher must resolve this question him/herself; for example, being invited on a free trip to an attractive tourist destination on the other side of the world (including accommodation in a luxury hotel) may enable the researcher to obtain first-hand knowledge of the cultural context and representatives of the religious group, but on the other hand it may mean the beginning of self-censorship or the loss of critical reflexivity.

## Conclusion

This list of problem areas in empirical research on religion is, of course, not complete. The academic study of religions opens up a number of other methodological problems associated with the value orientation and world view of the researcher's perspective. Among the most serious is the hidden and unsuspected ethnocentrism which is intrinsic in the conceptual and categorical terminological foundation of the discipline. Often we think (we recognize and interpret) in categories and schemes of thought which are deeply culturally (and religiously) determined.

There is no clear solution to the above-mentioned problem areas and resulting conclusions. Specific solutions always depend on particular situations and these change, not only over time and according to socio-cultural context, but also in the context of individual religious groups. If we examine religious groups as different as western devotees of Krishna, western Buddhists or followers of superior space civilizations, it is clear that in relation to each of these groups (in any specific religious environment), the researcher must behave in a different way and must adapt his/her research strategy to the environment. In a situation where there is religious diversity it is therefore not possible to create and adopt a single scheme which would be universally applicable, but it is necessary to create and adapt individual methodological approaches over the course of research. Moreover, the situation is even more complicated by the fact that the researcher rarely examines one religious group exclusively over an extended period of time, since parallel research on several groups allows interfaith (intergroup) comparison as well as continuous modification of research strategies.

Parallel research by different groups of researchers actually mirrors real religious diversity and provides direct experience (unlike that of most believers) of religious pluralism and the resulting cognitive dissonance and ontological uncertainty.

Individual researchers must come to their own various "solutions" to the problems mentioned above and then make their own choice of research strategy; the journey is long and difficult. Nevertheless, on this journey, in the context of religious and methodological diversity, it is good to keep to two interconnected principles: critical reflexivity and intellectual honesty.

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