Belief-Inclusive Research

Does Strategically "Bracketing Out" a Researcher's (Religious) Beliefs and Doubts Limit Access to Ethnographic Data?

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This article outlines a methodological posture that I consciously adopted during recent ethnographic fieldwork. I call this methodological posture "belief-inclusive research" (BIR), and I see it as a complementary contrast to existing methodological frameworks that suggest the bracketing out of a researcher's own beliefs. I offer BIR as a distinctive methodological posture for ethnographers who work in and with religious contexts. I demonstrate that the long-standing tradition of bracketing out questions of metaphysical truth during the writing-up phases of anthropology seems to have also impacted the fieldwork phase. I explore the ways that some degree of shared belief—which, crucially, I do not limit to doctrinal beliefs—between researcher and informants has the potential to widen a researcher's access to certain types of data. In highlighting that the long-standing practice of bracketing has limited a researcher's access to some kinds of data and in offering BIR as a new methodological posture, this article lays the groundwork for anthropology to construct new conceptual spaces that actively encourage a researcher to include their own (religious) beliefs and doubts in the midst of fieldwork.

Introduction

This article outlines a methodological posture that I consciously adopted during the course of my ethnographic fieldwork in 2016–2017; it also explores some of the repercussions of this methodological stance in a broader context of the study of religion. I call this posture "belief-inclusive research" (BIR) to refer to the ways that I intentionally and regularly included my own (religious) beliefs and also doubts in the conversations that I had with my informants, and I see BIR as a contrast—albeit a most complementary one—to existing and long-standing methodological frameworks that suggest the "bracketing out" of a researcher's own beliefs. I offer BIR as a distinctive theoretical and methodological posture for ethnographers who work in and with religious contexts.[1] In this article, I do not offer a detailed model for how the conceptual spaces of anthropology can facilitate BIR; instead, I focus on demonstrating that such a model is indeed needed if we are interested in widening and deepening our access to ethnographic data.

I chose to use BIR, as the second half of this article will discuss in greater detail, for three reasons. First, I desired to be as existentially transparent as possible in my interactions at my field site (a Christian ashram located in the north of India)—that is, I wanted to relate to my informants both as friends and as spiritual coseekers while being aware, of course, that my role as a researcher crucially affected some of our interpersonal and social dynamics. Second, and closely linked to the first reason, I felt that particular features of my field site—in its own words, it is open to people of "the *Christian* faith, a *different* faith, or even *no* faith"[2] (emphasis added)—made it an appropriate site to explore and articulate the spectrum of my own beliefs and doubts. Third, and most relevant to my present discussion, I had an initial sense that my intentional openness about my own beliefs and doubts would give me a certain degree of access to some types of ethnographic data that I otherwise might not have accessed.

The Disciplinary Backdrop of BIR

A fundamental methodological backbone of the social scientific study of religion is the bracketing out of questions of metaphysical truth while conducting empirical research. Although this concept was not articulated in the social sciences until the 1960s, we can see earlier intimations of it in some philosophical circles: Martin Heidegger (2010 [1927]) rejected the pursuit of metaphysics in his landmark work *Being and Time*, and Heidegger's teacher Edmund Husserl (1931) articulated the key concept of methodological bracketing (*epoché*). Methodological bracketing has since become a standard element

1. Of the four methodological postures indicated in a recent introductory textbook to the anthropology of religion, BIR most closely resembles the fourth posture, called "methodological theism." However, BIR remains distinct from methodological theism because of the ways that an active embracing of informants' truth claims is not a requirement of BIR (Bielo 2015:33–44).

2. This is one of the visions for Sat Tal Christian Ashram as articulated by its founder, E. Stanley Jones, in 1930.

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of the social sciences—especially in the contexts of qualitative research. This style of bracketing is often understood as laying down certain clear disciplinary boundaries between social scientists and theologians. Thus, Peter Berger (1974:125) argued that the social scientist's conscious refusal to pursue truth in a way that a theologian would is an "intrinsic limitation" of the social sciences. Following Berger's intrinsic limitation, two further limitations of the bracketing approach that I note briefly below have been pointed out.

Anthropology and the study of religion have, no doubt, changed since the time of Geertz, Berger, and the like. Some of these changes—notably, the reflexive turn, the ontological turn (for a summary, see Meneses 2021:484–485), and a turn toward a more "engaged" anthropology that calls on anthropologists to be more active in matters of social (in)justice and so on—have impacted the ways in which anthropologists approach their fieldwork. The ontological turn in particular has been responsible for carving out a degree of openness to the religious and spiritual beliefs of our informants that was not formerly prevalent (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Yet, as Eloise Meneses (2021) has argued about the ontological turn, "It is the religious views of the 'other' that are permitted exposition . . . and that only provisionally, rather than of the ethnographer" (478). Indeed, there has remained a near-tangible disciplinary unease with the concept that an anthropologist might consciously and intentionally voice her own (religious) beliefs and doubts.

I argue that there is an additional possible limitation that can be linked to methodological bracketing and that is usually left unaddressed in the literature on ethnographic methods. On the basis of formal and informal mentorship that I have received from anthropologists, I have often felt dutifully bound to approach my fieldwork with a significant degree of detachment regarding my own (religious) beliefs and doubts. At one point leading up to my PhD fieldwork, I was explicitly advised by an anthropologist not to speak "about *that* [my own religious-oriented viewpoints]; keep the conversations focused on *them*"—suggesting, in no trivial way, that my own beliefs and doubts surrounding metaphysical truth claims should be bracketed out not just from my analysis and writing up but also from my conversations during fieldwork. Some of my peers in anthropology—who, like me, received their training between 2008 and 2018—have similarly expressed the viewpoint that anthropologists should refrain from speaking of their own religious beliefs and doubts during their fieldwork, sometimes alluding to the well-established taboo in the discipline of an anthropologist "going native" (Ewing 1994). Still other colleagues might not feel beholden to any disciplinary prescriptive to refrain from such conversations, but, for one reason or another, they too do not delve into such metaphysical topics during their fieldwork.

I am not here interrogating whether or not anthropologists should weigh in on such questions in their writing-up phases of research. Instead, I am focused on the ways that intentionally refraining from offering judgments or expressing personal opinions on the topic of metaphysical truth seems to be a prevalent and expected part of the ethnographic fieldwork itself. We can see, rather clearly, the advice to refrain from actively engaging in questions and quests related to metaphysical truth claims articulated in the 1960s: Geertz (2008) advised anthropologists to adopt a stance of strict neutrality during their fieldwork, suggesting that they "put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents" (74). And more recently, in religious studies scholarship more generally, we can note a disciplinary unease with researchers sharing their own views of metaphysical reality in their conversations during their fieldwork (Orsi 2011, 2016). I contend that this subsequent absence of ethnographers speaking of their own beliefs and doubts in the field is not left unnoticed by their informants: Ruy Blanes (2006:224), for example, has noted that one of his informants vocalized the assumption that all anthropologists are atheists. Indeed, whether we are atheists, agnostics, or believers, we seem to have "put aside" our own beliefs and doubts. Yet in direct opposition to Geertz's advice to researchers to put these aside, I have found that my intentional decision to candidly voice my beliefs and doubts in various conversations with my informants—that is, to conduct BIR—has played a vital role in my ethnographic research. Thus, I contend, BIR has the potential to crucially widen an anthropologist's access to ethnographic data—perhaps, as I shall return to below, specifically in certain research contexts where belief is deemed by informants to be a uniquely indispensable aspect of life.

BIR Can Provide Unique Access to Ethnographic Data

I am not the first to advocate for the inclusion of a researcher's beliefs and doubts in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, and I am also not the first to claim that this inclusion would be of benefit to the discipline of anthropology; similar arguments have been offered by Brian Howell (2007), Eloise Meneses et al. (2014), Meneses (2021), and Naomi Haynes (Meneses et al. 2014:93–94), to give some recent examples. Where my argument differs from these other defenses is in my justification: while others have focused on important elements such as the potential for a deepened interpretation through drawing on one's own religious experiences, I instead focus on the researcher's ability to access ethnographic data. Specifically, I consider a number of examples from the ethnographic literature that cumulatively suggest that a researcher's own beliefs cannot be so hermetically quarantined without affecting a researcher's basic access to ethnographic data. To some, it may seem relatively superficial or even dissatisfactory to focus on accessing data, especially when alternate considerations and justifications for BIR could be grounded in the ways that reciprocal sharing (between informants and ethnographer) enhances the ethnographic encounter for all involved. No doubt, scholarship will continually push us to collectively explore some of these alternate considerations (Meneses 2021)—and I

look forward to being a part of those ongoing conversations. For now, let us explore and clearly articulate the underexplored argument that openly speaking about our beliefs and doubts will increase our access to ethnographic data.

I have compiled several instances that demonstrate that the informants' assessments of researchers' beliefs and worldviews can inform and shape the data that are shared in an interview setting, as well as critically influence whether researchers are invited by their informants to observe certain social phenomena. Since interviews and participant observation are two crucial pillars of qualitative research, researchers' access to these modes of data collection is of the utmost importance, and any limitations are worth noting and addressing. I argue that there are certain circumstances in which some degree of shared belief (or, rather, a degree that the informants think exists—a subtle yet important nuance that I shall return to momentarily) should exist between researchers and informants in order for researchers to gain a certain type of data access in interviews and participant observation. This space of shared belief between researchers and informants can take the form of mutually held doctrinal convictions in which researchers and informants possess resonating understandings of what is metaphysically true—such as "Christ was resurrected on the third day" or, pertinent to the ethnographic encounters I explore below, "Jesus can heal the body through prayer." Such iterations of doctrinal belief are likely what come to mind most readily when individuals consider the concept of shared belief. Alternately, shared belief can sometimes take the form of an existential openness to the category of belief itself. That is to say, the very willingness of researchers to voice their own beliefs and doubts and thus participate in a shared quest for metaphysical truth can convey the sense that such quests are not simply topics of social scientific inquiry but are themselves of vital existential importance—and consequently, what we can call a wider shared belief between informants and researchers can be forged even when the specific believed-in doctrines substantially differ. In other words, by speaking about our own beliefs and doubts, we signal that we care about metaphysical truth claims. (I will return to this in "Attaining a 'Wider' Shared Belief despite Doctrinal Differences.") Still, BIR itself is not as problem-free as one might hope—thus, I shall also expand on the messiness of BIR, which necessitates the forthcoming caveats: I argue that sometimes, some anthropologists should intentionally bring some of their own beliefs and doubts into the forefront of their ethnographic research, thereby sometimes increasing their access to ethnographic data with some of their informants.

Before I proceed, it is important to clarify a few points. First, I must clarify a phrase that I have mentioned twice already in the above paragraphs. When I invoke the concept of the "researcher's belief," it is not the neatly conceptualized belief system of the individual researcher alone that I am referring to—for to assume that the researcher's belief can somehow be tidily extracted from the wonderful yet messy webs of ethnographic research would fly in the face of some important realities of participant observation and ethnographic encounters. That is, we are not dealing with the researcher's beliefs in only the ways in which the researcher understands them; I am instead using the phrase as a shorthand expression to refer to the somewhat unpredictable manner in which informants can interpret and make sense of the researcher's beliefs. In this dialectical understanding, researchers' own ideas about themselves—which spiritual beliefs they hold on to, why they are conducting this research project, and so on—might not align neatly with their informants' understandings of the same. In this process, an informant might ascribe to an ethnographer a greater degree of belief than what they consider themselves to hold—for example, Anne Vallely (2002) writes about being told by an informant that Vallely's interest in Jainism was best explained by her having been a Jain nun in an earlier life, whereas Vallely's own explanation was less wrapped up in cosmological ideas of reincarnation: she writes that her interest stems from a film shown to her in her childhood. On the other hand, an ethnographer's informants might refuse to acknowledge as credible a particular belief that the ethnographer does claim to hold—for example, Joseph Webster (2013) writes about the ways that his Christian informants refused to accept that he was truly a Christian, and they consequently requested that he not participate in the sacrament of bread and wine. This refusal to accept Webster as a Christian persisted despite him having professed his own Christian faith both verbally and in written form (Webster 2013:15). In both of these ways—in what we might think of, respectively, as overascribing and withholding belief—the informants' assessments of the researcher's belief can challenge the researcher's self-understanding. Thus, there are numerous ways that a researcher's beliefs can be conceptualized, interrogated, ascribed, or denied by informants, and the researcher's belief is thus multiply resituated and formed during dialogical social interactions between two or more parties at the field site.

It is also necessary to note that this very concept of "belief" around which this entire article revolves merits some unpacking. After all, belief—at least certain notions of it—is the dominant feature of religion primarily for Protestant Christians, for whom belief is deemed especially important (Harding 2001; Luhrmann 2012; Webster 2013). Belief might not be as compelling or interesting to consider in some other contexts. Several anthropologists have demonstrated the ways that belief is not always held with such reverence as we may uncritically assume (Coleman 2009:118; Pouillon 2016:491–492; Ritchie 2002; Ruel 1982). My own explorations into the question of a researcher's own belief first arose when I was conducting fieldwork among Protestant charismatic Christians in Canada (2013–2015) and then developed further while I was conducting fieldwork at a Christian ashram in India (2016–2018) that, crucially, has its roots in Protestant denominations. Furthermore, my own childhood and teenage years, which were deeply embedded in Protestant communities, have no doubt made me particularly attuned to matters of belief in religious settings. Keeping these Protestant contexts in mind, ethnographers in their various field sites and areas of study will therefore have to consider

how relevant or useful this foregrounding of a researcher's belief is for them in their own research contexts. Thus, while I am aware of the limitations of focusing on a particularly Protestant phenomenon, I nonetheless feel that it is an interesting and helpful starting point—it is a specific enough context that, as Meneses (2021) suggests in her commentary on the way that anthropology-theology conversations tend to emerge from specifically Christian contexts, can be an "appropriate" way to "generate an interesting conversation" (479). As for BIR, it might very well be the case that, even in certain Protestant contexts, the notion of belief is not all that important (Howell 2007:377–380; Ruel 1982:98). If and when an anthropologist deems that BIR would be a sensible and helpful methodological posture to take in their fieldwork, they will still have to approach their fieldwork with a near-constant weighing of which and how many of their beliefs to disclose and when.[3]

Another point to clarify is that, while BIR is indeed my response to the disciplinary habit of researchers not speaking of their metaphysical beliefs and doubts during fieldwork, I by no means view BIR as an across-the-board replacement for research postures in which researchers do not speak of their own metaphysical beliefs (Bielo 2015:34–43); I am not here advocating for a cognitively superior or ideal theoretical framework in which to conduct ethnographic research. It would be extremely problematic to stipulate, *sans réserve*, that a researcher must necessarily share in and speak of the beliefs held by their informants to gain access to important ethnographic data because, simply put, the ethnographic data suggest otherwise: there are, for instance, a number of cases in which anthropologists' status as outsiders and nonbelievers positioned them as neutral receivers who, precisely because of their perceived neutrality or even their outside status, were able to gain access to important ethnographic data.

I interpret these multiple vantage points of data access to resonate with a theme that Joel Robbins (2015) has highlighted in discussing Marilyn Strathern's work: "Efforts to increase attachments in one direction tend to involve detaching from them in others" (115). Given that no human being—and, therefore, no anthropologist—occupies the Archimedean point of an impartial spectator (and this includes those embedded in secular worldviews; Asad 2003; Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 2010), a greater degree of "attachment" to one perspective or person is usually concurrent with a greater degree of "detachment" from another perspective or person. One lesson I take from this multidimensionality of human interactive spaces is that each anthropologist's unique status has the potential to give them access to distinct elements and different degrees of ethnographic data. Yet in gaining access to some of these elements, we lose sight of others. Therefore, recognizing the myriad of ways through which anthropologists can gain access to certain types of ethnographic data and also recognizing the infinite range of ethnographic data, this article contends that BIR should be viewed and embraced as one of many approaches to ethnographic research. Rather than merely reluctantly permit researchers to engage in discussions of their own (religious) beliefs and doubts, anthropology as a discipline should generate conceptual spaces for a posture of research that incorporates and thus actively invites researchers to bring in elements of their own religious beliefs and doubts while conducting their fieldwork research. This sort of conceptual space will require one or more models to be developed—I suspect that they will benefit from in-depth dialogues between anthropologists and Christian theologians—but I only scratch the surface of those dialogues here, and I do not propose a specific model for how BIR can be encouraged with anthropology. But as a means of clearly justifying why these models are needed, I explore the disciplinary backdrop that has led many anthropologists to bracket out their beliefs in the first place, and consequently, I show that bracketing out (religious) beliefs, in fact, limits our access to data.

3. For an overview of the ways in which belief has been treated by sociological and anthropological disciplines, see chap. 1 of Day (2011).

Methodological Bracketing: Justifications and Intrinsic Limitation

Above, I indicated that BIR is related to methodological bracketing in an indirect but important manner. We can summarize the relationship through considering two linked premises: (1) Methodological bracketing demands that anthropologists, in their written works, do not assert truth claims about metaphysical reality; it is not within the disciplinary bounds of anthropology to do so. (2) Some anthropologists refrain from exploring or expressing their own beliefs regarding metaphysical truth during the course of their fieldwork and instead strive to enact a stance of "neutrality" à la Geertz. It seems to me that the disciplinary bounds mentioned in 1 have infiltrated other aspects and phases of the discipline. Specifically, some anthropologists straightforwardly and consistently assume a research posture in which they dare not divulge their own standpoints regarding metaphysical truth, even during the process of fieldwork. BIR should be understood not as a suggestion to overturn the first premise but as a response to the second premise.

To better understand methodological bracketing itself, we may begin with G. Van der Leeuw (2014), who, in the late 1920s, understood the use of the bracketing approach as a strategy to ensure that "no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed 'between brackets,' as it were" and argued that this restriction resulted in "abstention from all judgment regarding these controversial topics" (646). We find a development of this methodological bracketing in Berger's (1969) classic sociological text *The Sacred Canopy*, where he argues that "every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on methodological atheism" (100). Several years later, Berger (1974) restates his conviction that "the *scientific* study of religion must bracket the ultimate truth claims implied by its subject" (125). Berger's primary justification for "methodological atheism" is

that the social scientist, qua scientist, must consider only that which is empirically available—this stipulation automatically excludes weighing in on the reality of many phenomena described by religious believers. After arguing that scientific methods require empirically verifiable data points, he states: "Whatever else they may be or not be, the gods are not empirically available, and neither their nature nor their existence can be verified through the very limited procedures given to the scientist" (125). Berger then concludes that "anyone engaged in the scientific study of religion will have to resign himself to this intrinsic limitation—regardless of whether, in his extrascientific existence, he is a believer, an atheist, or a skeptic" (126). Importantly, it is not that Berger himself wishes to invalidate or debunk religious claims; he argues only that questions of truth (i.e., rather than "truths" in the sense of meaningful experiences claimed by informants) are not ones that fall within the disciplinary realm of social scientific study. We can see similar arguments articulated by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962:162) and, more recently, by Arvind Sharma (2001:230). Given the institutional pervasiveness of these viewpoints, ethnographers who hold on to specific religious beliefs have often "been considered problematic, if not anathema, to the anthropological enterprise" (Howell 2007:372).

While, following Berger, methodological bracketing does not demand that the researcher dismiss religious faith as a "total illusion," it does require that the researcher is willing to bracket out or suspend such questions of substantive truth for the purpose of research. That is to say, if and when an anthropologist comes across an informant who makes a metaphysical truth claim about God, the anthropologist has been advised "to avoid arbitrating and evaluating and simply to begin describing, cataloguing, and comparing the various claims in favor or against the existence of such a deity. One who claims that a god either does or does not direct the world may be right; but then again, they may be wrong. In light of no publicly testable and debateable evidence one way or another, there is little to be gained from trying to prove or dismiss such claims" (McCutcheon 1999:8). Ninian Smart (1973*a*), who played a significant role in founding the first religious studies department in the United Kingdom, thus articulated in the early 1970s that any question about truth is "a question not asked, not a belief left undecided" (62). Less than one decade later, a similar view was expressed in a rather different context. In writing the preface to an edited volume that sought to include both theological and anthropological scholarship on the topic of sacrifice, Meyer Fortes (1980) suggested that agnosticism should be practiced by anthropologists so that they can have "a professionally correct approach to their task," by which he meant, he clarified, the ability "to achieve objectivity" (vi–vii).

Furthermore, because the tools available within the social sciences do not enable a social scientist to engage with truth claims theologically, social scientists must instead focus on the empirical aspects of the phenomenon that they are studying, thus rendering their exploration methodologically secular. C. Roderick Wilson summarizes this approach of methodologically secular scholarship quite well when referring to anthropologists trained in Western institutional spaces. He says, "We carried around with us scientific explanations of natural phenomena that allowed us to 'normalize' observations, to bring observations that ran counter to the usual into conformity with the expected" (Wilson 1994:199). This normalizing approach remains a fairly standard practice in the social scientific study of religion: religious experiences cannot usually be brought into a scientific laboratory for controlled experimental study, and they do not always work in predictable patterns. Thus, they cannot be circumscribed within the canons of verifiability and falsification required by scientific empiricism. It is this conceptual and disciplinary incompatibility with empirical methods—involving predictability, quantification, and repeatability—that, on the basis of Berger's argument for bracketing, mandates that social scientists should consciously refuse to explore questions concerning the metaphysical reality of their informants' putative religious experiences.[4]

These methodological debates apply in particular to the discipline of anthropology, which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century from the desire to understand humans and cultures. In the self-understanding of most anthropologists, anthropology is especially distinct from theology in this particular regard: whereas confessional theologians make their inquiries "explicitly in relation to a specific religious confession, or a combination of sacred texts, traditions, and confessions" (Wildman 2016:242), anthropology has never presented itself as a doorway to universal truth. Instead, anthropology has dedicated itself to understanding how and why things are the way they are in a particular time and place. It highlights the local, the incidental, the particular, the fragmentary, and the liminal; anthropology therefore has a methodological antipathy to configuring universalizing claims in the style of grand theory or transcultural narrative.[5] M. F. C. Bourdillon (1980) clearly delineates these distinctions between the two disciplines by claiming that "theology studies the traditions from within . . . anthropologists look at different cultures from the point of views of outsiders" (5). Joel Robbins (2018:238–242) emphasizes that a key difference lies in anthropologists' unwillingness to pass judgment on the phenomena they study. Anthropology tries to combat social forms of ethnocentrism by highlighting cultural relativities across diverse local settings of different

4. There has been a shift among anthropologists to refer to the individuals alongside whom they conduct ethnographic research as "interlocutors." The reason for this shift, as I understand it, is to acknowledge the collaborative nature of ethnographic research and give credit to members of the community. Here, I align myself with Marilyn Strathern (1999) and choose to use the term "informant." I retain the term "informant" to implicitly acknowledge that there remains a substantive degree of agency that lies with the informants.

5. An anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out one exception to this: there is a long lineage within the discipline—including thinkers like Edward Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, Leslie White, Julian Steward, and Roy D'Andrade—that advocates for anthropology as a science capable of offering a universal grand theory.

groups of outsiders, and these context-dependent variabilities render questions of absolute universal truth problematic, if not unanswerable. Thus, anthropologists are taught that they must "neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods" (Smart 1973*b*:54) lest they confuse their methodological and theoretical frameworks with those of theologians.

While theological questions are sometimes interesting to the individual anthropologist qua individual, they are not—at least not within the common disciplinary matrices—questions that an anthropologist raises qua anthropologist, let alone seeks to answer. While it is this conscious refusal to explore questions of metaphysical truth that, as we saw above, Berger referred to as an intrinsic limitation of the discipline, this restriction should not be read in a negative sense. Berger does not begrudge the social sciences for this methodological limitation, and he also does not urge social scientists to find a way to overcome it. Rather, for Berger, this limitation is a constitutive aspect of the social sciences since the moment a social scientist has moved beyond that which is empirical, she would no longer be exploring topics qua social scientist.[6] Indeed, even in very recent dialogues between anthropologists and theologians, some scholars from both disciplines continue to assert the need for each discipline to maintain its "autonomy"; anthropologists—even those who are keenly interested in learning from the disciplinary activities and insights of theologians—must remain anthropologists (Lemons 2018:6). Thus, it is not surprising that social scientists, even or rather especially those within the anthropology of religion—a scholarly circle where, as Jon Bialecki (2014) comments tongue in cheek, the optimistic and the innocent "might expect [talk of God] the most" (33)—often do not speak of God at all, let alone make metaphysical truth claims regarding God.

Two Additional Limitations to Methodological Bracketing

While Berger felt no need to overcome the intrinsic limitation, many anthropologists have regarded other limitations as clear indications that a certain measure of theoretical reformation of the discipline of anthropology is needed. There are two limitations that I have found to be communicated—either directly or indirectly—by several scholars who are broadly situated in the field of the social scientific study of religion and that are sometimes also conveyed by scholars in the hard sciences. We cannot look at these in more detail here, but they require mention. First, we see the limitation that total objectivity is conceptually impossible even with systematic attempts at bracketing (Bowie 2003; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Crapanzano 1985, 1986; Geertz 1989; Nagel 2003; Polanyi 1958:142; Rabinow 2007; Ruby 1982).

Second, we note the limitation that bracketing is, in any case, deeply hegemonic because it reinforces a power dynamic that privileges researchers' worldviews and interpretive frameworks over those of their informants. In short, when researchers deem that any question of metaphysical truth can be neatly extracted from other anthropological considerations, we implicitly favor our interpretive framework over those of our informants—many of whom would never accept such a division (Cantrell 2016; Ewing 1994:572; Howell 2007; Hufford 1995:61; Larsen 2014:8; Merz et al. 2017; Moll 2018; Northcote 2004; Poewe 1994; Porpora 2006).

Methodological Bracketing Limits Access to Ethnographic Data

Having discussed the bracketing approach along with its justifications and limitations, let us return to my critical argument concerning a researcher's belief and access to ethnographic data. In many ways, my questions here might appear rather simple—but it is sometimes those simple questions that can be cast aside and overlooked for so long. I wonder, Are we approaching our research in a way that invites our informants to speak truthfully and, without glossing over their spiritual viewpoints, openly speak with us in an interview setting? Furthermore, are we approaching our research in ways where our informants would be comfortable enough to invite us to observe or even to participate alongside certain events? Or does the absence of conversations concerning our own metaphysical beliefs and quests—and, indeed, even our very disciplinary tendency toward secularist explanations and an absence of "talk about God" (Bialecki 2014)—limit our access to ethnographic data, thereby resulting in incomplete, if not inaccurate, explanations of the very emic views that we are striving to understand? In other words, do ethnographers experience any belief-related limitations in their attempts to collect ethnographic data?

Above, I noted Geertz's assertion that anthropologists should be "neutral" when conducting their research. But such neutrality, I have contended throughout this article, is not possible or desirable on various grounds—something that Katherine P. Ewing (1994) has clearly established in her interrogation of Geertz's recommendation that anthropologists adapt a stance of neutrality. (Similar arguments have been made with reference to the sort of secularism referenced by key thinkers like Talal Asad [2003]; even secular standpoints are not neutral.) Ewing argues that, in her effort to be a neutral anthropologist, she was perceived as an atheist outsider; the stance of Geertzian neutrality proved impossible. This raises the following question: How often do our refusals to personally participate in conversations related to metaphysical truth claims while in the field in turn portray us as uninterested in questions of truth? Put alternately, how might a perceived lack of belief—or a lack of interest in the very question of belief—limit our access to data? I contend that this limitation happens often enough to

6. Larsen (2014:109) draws attention to a similar argument made by Evans-Pritchard in his book on Nuer religion, in which Evans-Pritchard says that there is a point at which "the theologian takes over from the anthropologist."

merit addressing, and it is this conviction that motivated me to approach my PhD fieldwork with a posture of BIR.

Throughout the fieldwork I conducted at a Christian ashram for my PhD, I consciously chose to honestly incorporate my beliefs and doubts about Protestant Christian doctrines into the conversations that I had with my informants. To be sure, I did not always share the same beliefs as my informants, but I also did not strive for a Geertzian form of neutrality. My willingness to speak openly about my own beliefs and doubts to my informants indicated a more general willingness and eagerness to understand, in turn, their own beliefs and doubts. As they saw it, I was evidently interested in and committed to discussing metaphysical truth, and this conveyed a form of interest in and commitment to the category of belief itself.

My ideas for BIR first originated during my master's fieldwork (2013–2015), when I encountered some belief-related limitations throughout the course of my ethnographic fieldwork among charismatic Christians in Canada as a result of my effort to enact a Geertzian neutrality. During the course of that fieldwork, certain informants did not volunteer information during interviews until they first felt assured that I shared or was at least conceptually open toward their beliefs; others did not want to allow me to observe certain rituals because of what was perceived by them to be my lack of belief—I return to this point in more detail in the following subsections. My searching for and ultimately adopting a research posture that allowed me not to clinically bracket out questions of belief during the fieldwork that I conducted at Sat Tal Christian Ashram for my PhD, then, are largely the result of my frustration, bewilderment, and reflection surrounding the limitations I encountered when trying my best to adopt methodological bracketing and neutrality as my research stance. The results of conducting fieldwork in this manner—that is, the ethnographic data and the analysis—can be seen in both my PhD thesis and forthcoming monograph (Pohran 2020). But as this article is not primarily a demonstration of BIR and what sorts of data it leads to, let us presently turn to some ethnographic literature to explore how bracketing out belief can limit our access to ethnographic data and, in doing so, highlight why such an approach should be embraced by the anthropological discipline more broadly.

Information Volunteered by Informants (Interviews)

First, let us consider some ways in which a researcher's beliefs can shape the information volunteered by informants in interview settings. I have myself experienced moments with my informants—and also noted other anthropologists' experiences—in which a perceived absence of shared belief between researcher and informant can sometimes inhibit informants from sharing freely with anthropologists. We can see this conscious inhibition by informants playing out in Blanes's succinct documentation of his experience of admitting to one of his informants—an elder in the gypsy Pentecostal group that Blanes was studying—that Blanes was, in fact, an atheist. During their initial conversation, the elder asked Blanes which church he belonged to. Blanes (2006), recalling the incident, reports, "When I answered that I wasn't a believer, he bluntly turned his back on me and spoke no more" (228).

Let us consider, in more detail, a case from the fieldwork of Marie-Françoise Guédon as she documented it in 1994. Guédon (1994) notes that, during her ethnographic research among the Dené in northern Canada, she was "tested by [her] instructors [informants who occupied a place of leadership in the community] before they gave an answer" to her questions concerning shamanic medicine (52). She goes on to explain that her informants initially provided her with explanations of the same type and depth that they would usually provide to a young child; it was only after Guédon shared her own experiences with them (such as her dreams, which resulted in her informants attributing to her the status of a spiritual healer) that individuals began to inform her more thoroughly about their own spiritual beliefs. As one of her informants said, "[There is no point in talking about certain things] to a white man, even an anthropologist, unless you knew he was going to understand" (43). This insightful, succinct, and also poignant comment raises important questions about what it means to "understand" our informants and our research topics more broadly. Guédon's informants wanted her to understand—and, indeed, believe—their own worldview in a conceptual or intellectual manner, but they also wanted her to vitally understand in a more personal, somatic, and experiential way. Crucially, it was her informants' view that Guédon had arrived at her own experiential understanding and also that she shared some of their beliefs or was at least open to exploring the possibility that her informants' configuring of Guédon as a healer might indeed be metaphysically truthful that led them, in turn, to relay their own beliefs and experiences more directly and thoroughly to her. Importantly, we can note that a genuine openness to belief itself was of crucial importance for these informants to speak genuinely in an interview.

Observations Accessed by Researchers (Participant Observation)

There are also instances in the ethnographic literature where researchers' beliefs have affected the types of data they are able to access via participant observation. Anthropologist Jacob Loewen (1974) documents an account of working alongside a certain Christian missionary, David, in Panama. Despite their eagerness to be involved, David and Loewen were excluded from the community's healing rituals because of—somewhat ironically—what the community described as their "lack of faith." The community interpreted certain biblical passages on healing (provided by the Christian missionaries themselves) to mean that authentic faith was required for healing results. But because Loewen and David were seen as favoring biomedical views of healing over the concept of faith-based prayer healing, the Christian community intentionally excluded them from the community's prayer time. Loewen (1974) recalls the

leading men of the church apologetically pulling him aside and saying, "I am sorry, but [the healing] doesn't work when you and David are in the circle. You and David don't really believe" (4–11; cited in Wilson 1994:204). How might Loewen's ethnographic fieldwork have been altered had he been able to observe the healing rituals, an evidently important aspect of the community's practice? And more generically, what types and depths of participant observation are ethnographers consistently prevented from accessing because of the ways in which they are perceived by their informants as lacking in genuine belief?

As I have indicated, I encountered some belief-related limitations during my ethnographic work on spiritual healing in charismatic Protestant communities in Canada (Pohran 2015). The following vignette demonstrates that my informants' willingness to allow me to conduct participant observation depended heavily on their certification of my own belief: in the charismatic-inflected view of my informants, the universe is understood as being in a constant state of a spiritual battle where Christian soldiers are easily wounded. The entire cosmos is conceptualized as teeming with legions of evil spirits that—if given the opportunity—will distract, disrupt, torment, or, possibly, violently possess an individual. Evil spirits are equipped with particular specializations and abilities, and they are named after their sinister predilections: "Lust," "Trauma," "Death," and so on. Accordingly, many of my informants described themselves as "soldiers" who are constantly on the spiritual battlefield, where one's thoughts, actions, and even involuntary experiences can "create an opening" for an evil spirit to wreak havoc in an individual's life. Charismatics thus see themselves not only as potential targets but also as key players in this cosmic battle.

Four months into my ethnographic research, the topic of whether I could attend a "personal ministry appointment"—that is, an individual prayer healing session—as a participant observer came up in casual conversation. Maureen, the woman who would receive the prayer healing session, was someone with whom I had formed a friendship, and it seemed to me that attending her session would be permissible on account of our mutual acquaintance. But this possibility of me attending as simply an allegedly neutral observer was met with hesitation by the "lead" (the primary of the two healers in any individual healing session). The lead's hesitations were due to her uncertainty about my own worldview and personal practices. Was I engaged in any sort of activity—deliberately or accidentally, known or unknown—that might "give territory" to an evil spirit? If and when any spirits were cast out of Maureen, would they simply enter me instead? Furthermore, had I undergone the necessary rituals that would eradicate any existing evil spirits from me, or might I in fact invite or even actively bring in evil spirits to the prayer healing session with my very presence? And even if I were willing to go through the cleansing rituals, would such rituals be effective on me without a proper and personal foundation of genuine faith, which is thought to be necessary for the rituals to be efficacious? Even more generally, the spiritual healing community wanted assurance that the research process was "more than an academic exercise" for me. Indeed, many individuals were hesitant to share any of their more meaningful spiritual healing experiences—even in casual conversational settings—unless they were assured that I would find the process of learning from them enriching or at least challenging on a personal and spiritual level.[7] Any careful skirting around the question of metaphysical truth was simply dissatisfactory to my informants.

In my attempt to establish credibility and trust with my informants, I had already followed the advice that I received from an influential member of this Christian community in the earliest stage of my research: before beginning any formal interviews or participant observation sessions, I first attended a group spiritual healing retreat where I had my own personal ministry appointment with a lead and a second healer. They had walked me through various reflections on my life experiences and family lineages and then prompted me to speak out certain prayers loudly to "break ungodly soul ties" that might be wreaking havoc in me. The specificities of this process were outside my own spiritual practices and beliefs, but I participated in all of it as best as I could—and my informants, including Maureen and the healers who would be facilitating Maureen's personal ministry appointment, knew that I had undergone my own personal ministry appointment. I am not sure what else I could have done to become someone whom my informants would view as trustworthy and whom they might be freely willing to invite as an observer of their practices. Yet I was aware that it was my belief—or, in this particular case, my assumed lack of belief in the structures of their cosmological universe and their teachings of spiritual redemption—that continued to concern them. As I look back, it probably did not help matters that I tried to enact a sort of curious but overall indifferent neutrality in those conversations. They wanted more than a mere inclination or willingness to go through the motions of participation. They wanted me not just to know in the sense of accumulating bits of information or even acquiring knowledge (in the sense of the French *savoir* or the German *wissen*) but also to intimately know (*connaître* in French or *kennen* in German) my own healing. They wanted me to deeply and truly believe.

In the end, mainly because of the plea of Maureen, who felt that my ability to observe the event would be of crucial importance to me developing understanding of the community's spiritual healing practices, I was invited to attend the session. Observing the healing session firsthand turned out to be extraordinarily helpful to my understanding of the community's healing practices; it provided me with a much more nuanced grasp of the practices involved with healing and also with some context for many of my later interviews. As far as I am concerned,

7. There are further research difficulties when the researcher is obligated to be a participant rather than strictly an observer. Susan Harding (1987) provides an excellent example of the difficulties of conducting participatory research among Baptists who practice different charismatic traditions.

the invitation to observe a personal healing was crucial in increasing my understanding of the phenomenon. But the two healers later commented on my attendance at Maureen's ministry session and reflected regretfully that it was a mistake to have allowed me to attend at all. They speculated that my presence had changed the atmosphere substantially and was likely the reason that the healing had not been as efficacious as had been hoped for. To illustrate, the lead gave me an example: "You know when we had Maureen lay down in the coffin and we called her up from the dead?[8] She didn't take it seriously. She caught your eye, smiled, and went along as if it were all a hoke [melodramatic] ritual. Because probably somewhere she knew that you weren't taking it seriously, either" (Pohran 2015).

The controversies and the negotiations that unraveled as a result of my desire to attend Maureen's personal ministry session and other similar moments were the first experiences that forced me to grapple with the question of my own belief as a researcher. Specifically, these experiences made me consider how my informants' perception of my belief shaped the ethnographic data they allowed me to access: I began to wonder what else I might have missed out on observing because of the ways they perceived my belief. While I never contemplated strategically changing the specifics of my (religious) beliefs and doubts for the purpose of gaining better ethnographic access, I could not escape the conviction that my own belief—or rather, the lack of shared belief in the specific doctrinal points that my informants deeply valued—was a barrier to my research.

But interestingly and crucially, this reflection did not then lead me to conclude that I must share my informants' specific doctrinal beliefs to gain access. (I return to this below.) My reflections instead led me to ask more generally: "What posture must anthropologists actively cultivate in order to demonstrate that they are willing to 'take seriously' the beliefs of their informants?"[9] Motivated by this experience at the healing session, I began to understand that a researcher's belief and the broader questions of truth claims cannot be neatly quarantined from anthropological reflection and practice. Indeed, the anthropologist's assessment of what is really happening out there matters vitally for the anthropologist's craft because it crucially affects and even shapes the data that we seek to and are able to access—both in interviews and in participant observation settings. To be sure, it is our informants who, to some extent, decide what we are able to have access to, yet at the same time, our conscious refusal to speak candidly about our own (religious) beliefs and doubts can all too readily communicate that we simply do not care about the pursuit of metaphysical truth itself. Indeed, through refraining from speaking of their beliefs and doubts, researchers are being abruptly denied access to the very phenomena they wish to observe and understand. Conducting BIR, at least—we can recall my extensive caveats listed in the introduction—in some instances, could solve this dilemma.

Attaining a "Wider" Shared Belief despite Doctrinal Differences

I want to be clear that when I say that anthropologists can use BIR as a way of attaining a shared belief with their informants, I am not suggesting that conducting BIR entails possessing and professing the specific doctrinal beliefs (e.g., that bodily healing can result from prayer or certain rituals) of their informants. Indeed, there are and will always be a number of researchers who cannot be believers—at least not in the fully committed ways their informants might desire them to be. Some anthropologists even work with informants who hold beliefs that are distinctly unpalatable to the researchers: speaking candidly of his view of his informants, Leo Coleman (2009) confesses, "In short, I didn't like some of the people I had to participate with as I observed them, and I didn't like their politics" (116–118). Other anthropologists, while having no specific moral or ethical disagreements with the beliefs held by their informants, simply cannot adopt those particular beliefs as their own. My own ethnographic encounters are a testament of this: in addition to being an inadequate believer insofar as my fieldwork with Maureen and other charismatic healers was concerned, I also experienced a sheer inability to be, in their eyes, a satisfactory believer during my fieldwork at a Christian ashram. I can recall one poignant moment when Shreya, a young and fervent ashramite whose Protestant beliefs were inflected with charismatic Christianity, asked me to join a small group who would pray with her, requesting Jesus to powerfully intervene in a difficult family situation and heal her uncle's illness. "The Bible says," Shreya told me with faith-filled conviction, "that if we believe, then Jesus will heal." I had come to like Shreya very much during the weeks we spent together at the ashram, and I would have loved to tell her, "*Absolutely* I will pray to Jesus with the others!" But my (religious) belief (or, rather, my doubt) did not permit me to sincerely say such a thing about intercessory prayer—or, at least, my (Protestant-shaped) conscience did not allow me to falsely profess to her. Sometimes, some beliefs are simply not attainable. Keeping what we might call the intrinsic limitations of belief formation in mind, at this point, we might ask, What are the implications of BIR for anthropologists who are, unbudgingly, unable to embrace their informants' deeply held religious beliefs?

In addition to the reality, discussed above, that all anthropologists access unique data on the basis of their unique vantage points (Gordon 1987), there are further pragmatic reasons why it would be problematic to argue that BIR must entail holding the same doctrinal beliefs as informants. What about the social reality that a "community" of informants is not

8. I explored this ritual in more detail in my MA thesis: this is a physical enactment of raising someone from the dead so as to symbolize their new life in Christ and their freedom from past bondages.

9. While this question is also one that has been asked by proponents of the ontological turn (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017 for an overview), the ways in which these scholars sought to take seriously the belief of informants were focused more on the worldviews of the informants than on those of the scholars (see Meneses 2021).

entirely homogeneous in their beliefs, so ethnographers simply cannot experience shared doctrinal beliefs with every individual alongside whom they are conducting research? Which beliefs are then to be given precedence and deemed to be the most important ones to share to gain access to the ethnographic data that, I have argued, hinge around a perceived shared belief between research and informant? Doctrinal beliefs? Or beliefs about justice, politics, social systems, environmental crises, gender roles and gender fluidity, science and the laws of nature, education? One must also consider whether a researcher could be justified in simply pretending to believe so as to potentially gain more access and greater insight into a phenomenon. That is to say, to what extent, if at all, are mere professions of belief ethically permissible? If, as Joel Robbins (2018) has suggested, anthropologists are becoming "more and more interested in rendering frank judgments" (241) and are increasingly seeking to offer the world "hope for real change" (Robbins 2006:293), are there certain phenomena that would ethically justify false professions of belief—assuming that such a profession might, in turn, lead anthropologists to gain a better understanding of the phenomena they studied? And what of the reality that, recalling our subtle yet important nuance articulated toward the beginning of this article, no matter what the precise details of researchers' own beliefs are, the informants will inevitably form their own conclusions about researchers' beliefs that may or may not align with the ways that researchers understand their own beliefs?

These questions, centered around the notion of sharing doctrinal beliefs, are interesting in their own regard, and they will require further exploration when we reach a point of developing a model for precisely how BIR might fit into anthropology's conceptual spaces. But these questions also compel me to consider something that I first hinted at in the introductory pages of this article and that I again gestured to in this section's opening paragraph. Namely, is there a way to attain a shared belief that does not necessitate sharing the particular doctrinal beliefs of others? Throughout this article I have mentioned some of the ways that I divulged my (religious) beliefs, as well as my doubts, to my informants at the Christian ashram. I did not strive to convince them that we possessed identical doctrinal beliefs—although sometimes we did seem to mutually hold certain beliefs, such as the benefit of reading the Bible. And this very willingness to divulge my beliefs and doubts seemed to convey and confirm to my informants that I deeply valued the category of belief and the pursuit of metaphysical truth itself. In this sense, although our doctrinal beliefs differed, we indeed attained what we could here call a wider shared belief—by which I mean a belief that does not hinge on believing the same specific doctrines.

The ongoing conversations between anthropology (of Christianity) and (Christian) theology are insightful in both grounding and deepening what I mean by wider shared belief—I especially find some of the thoughts on what anthropology can "take" (i.e., learn and adopt or adapt) from theology to be very helpful (Robbins 2006, 2014). In this vein of anthropologists learning from theologians, we can consider one particularly helpful and thought-provoking idea proposed by the Christian theologian Christopher Morse. Morse offers a helpful launching pad for our present consideration of a wider shared belief that is not limited to doctrinal specifics. Christian theology itself is wrought with what Morse (2009) calls "faithful disbelief." Among a community of Christians, there is a shared understanding of what one should not believe; these shared disbeliefs can sometimes be a more than adequate doctrinal basis for solidarity. That is to say, Morse highlights that it is through faithfully disbelieving what is not of God that Christian groups can be formed and sustained.

I want to take Morse's insight and apply it more generally. From Morse, we learn that it is not only through mutually inhabiting specific doctrinal beliefs that individuals can form a sense of institutional cohesion. Crucially, there is something beyond specific doctrinal beliefs that can bind individuals together and cause them to feel trust and ease. Applying this insight from Christian theology to the context of BIR, I want to suggest that it is not just doctrinal beliefs themselves that necessarily establish a rapport between researcher and informant and thus allow the researcher to access certain types of ethnographic data. Perhaps, more simply, it could be the shared belief that the quest for belief—and the pursuit of metaphysical truth—matters at all. That is to say, even though I am an anthropologist who does not hold the same set of doctrinal beliefs and the same types of doubts as (some of) my Protestant Christian informants, it is nonetheless precisely my theological preoccupation with belief and my unrelenting Protestantism-shaped emphasis on the soteriological importance of belief that might be enough to establish a sufficient measure of cognitive-affective solidarity with and, consequently, gain the trust of my Christian informants.[10] Put alternately, my metabelief that belief matters may be significant enough to suffice—at least as a starting point—for gaining access to the types of ethnographic data that I have been concerned with herein. Although I may have disagreed with some of the specifics, I resoundingly agreed that beliefs and the very category of belief should not be trivialized.

With this understanding of the possibility of attaining a wider shared belief, we can begin to understand that BIR does not necessitate that anthropologists share the specific doctrinal details of their informants' beliefs. So while my original questions on this broad topic emerged from my failure to share the specific doctrinal beliefs (in my case, regarding charismatic prayer healing) of my informants, the process of reflecting on this barrier has led me to suspect that it is, in fact, this form of a wider shared belief that is within our control. Indeed, anthropologists can attain a form of shared belief with their informants through their own willingness to divulge their own

10. With gratitude to Joel Robbins and my fellow PhD students in our anthropology of Christianity group who met during my time at the University of Cambridge. This topic came up in our discussion of an earlier draft of this article, and I am grateful for the collective thoughts and insights that were shared with me.

religious beliefs and doubts. As we speak honestly about our own beliefs and doubts, we signal that we genuinely care about metaphysical truth. We can recall from my ethnographic encounter in my 2014–2015 fieldwork that the lead healer of the charismatic Christian group I worked with thought that I was not "taking seriously" the doctrinal beliefs about healing and prayer that she and Maureen held on to. Perhaps, had I been willing to intentionally voice the spectrum of my own beliefs and doubts, they might have seen that I indeed did take their experiences seriously. Through my willingness to speak honestly rather than try to act neutrally, she might have even seen that we indeed shared the importance of seeking, sifting through, and proclaiming truth(s). Applying Morse's insights, I think that there is reason to think that this type of wider shared belief might, in turn, be enough to overcome the existing barriers that have been preventing our informants from sharing truthfully in interview settings or inviting us to observe or even participate in certain phenomena.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen that the habitual placing aside of the question of metaphysical truths can limit our access to ethnographic data. Thus, I contend that we need more conceptual space in anthropology for ethnographers to adopt, cultivate, and sustain a stance of BIR when conducting their fieldwork and writing up their ethnographies. The content of this article has demonstrated that the need for this sort of conceptual space is vital; we need a methodological posture like BIR to be not only tolerated but also actively encouraged so that individuals within the wider anthropological community can confidently choose to approach their research in a way that actively discusses metaphysical truths without worrying that they are betraying the normatively secular foundations of their discipline or worrying that they will be "dismissed by colleagues as one who has foolishly gone native" (Turner 1994). I hope that this article and its articulation of some of the more utilitarian reasons behind adopting BIR can lay the groundwork for encouraging other scholars (and me) to creatively and laboriously imagine, design, and enact some of the ways that this can look. Embracing such a posture will involve significant rethinking of the ways that we advise young anthropologists to approach their fieldwork—but the potential fruits of this change are well worth the inevitable toils involved.

In the edited volume *Reinventing Anthropology*, Bob Scholte (1999) argues that "intellectual paradigms, including anthropological traditions, are culturally mediated, that is they are contextually situated and relative. . . . If anthropological activity is culturally mediated, it is in turn subject to ethnographic description and ethnological analysis" (432). While Scholte is not advocating for a form of metaethnography (whereby, e.g., an anthropologist conducts an ethnographic study among anthropologists who themselves are conducting ethnographic studies), he draws our attention to the often overlooked reality that anthropologists are themselves part of a wider cultural community whose actions and beliefs are influenced by their surrounding environments. If, in simple terms, we can describe cultural anthropology as a discipline that concludes that "research participant X acts in a particular way largely due to the cultural influences of Y and Z," then we must be willing to envision the very discipline of cultural anthropology in a similar fashion. That is, "anthropologist X acts in a particular manner largely due to the cultural influences of Y and Z." The anthropologist's beliefs and actions, qua anthropologist, have not been formed in a cultural vacuum; we can—and, as erudite scholars, we should—interrogate these very beliefs and practices related to the ways we approach our research. The ways that anthropologists approach their craft are the result of a series of numerous interactions, teaching moments, textbook instructions, and even anecdotes shared among anthropologist peers on the way to (and at) the local pub. Some of these influences are fairly explicit (such as the moments of formal mentorship and instruction that anthropologists undergo), while others can be more implicit (such as reading ethnographies and subtly absorbing the methodological tendencies embodied and portrayed within them or noting a striking absence of conversations relating to the researcher's beliefs and doubts). Not all of these influences need to be uncritically and unwaveringly adhered to. This article has looked at the disciplinary influences that have shaped the adoption of methodological bracketing by some anthropologists as their normative research posture and, subsequently, has argued that anthropology as a discipline needs to make space for researchers to include their own (religious) beliefs and doubts in the fieldwork process. By our willingness to speak with vulnerability and honesty about our own beliefs and doubts, thus signaling our commitment to the pursuit of metaphysical truth, we have the potential to attain a wider shared belief with our informants. Consequently, we have the potential to broaden our access to ethnographic data. And that, after all, is what we cultural anthropologists are after.

Comments

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A Distinction within "Methodological Bracketing"

Let me begin my analysis of Pohran's call for a methodological posture of belief-inclusive research (BIR) by expressing my unqualified support for this recommendation: anthropologists ought to be willing to candidly share their own metaphysical beliefs and doubts with informants when doing so is likely to build trust and goodwill and thereby help them access relevant data. With this major point of agreement acknowledged, I will use the rest of my commentary to express a reservation about Pohran's analysis: I would like to see better evidence that the

forms of "methodological bracketing" practiced by anthropologists are, as Pohran claims, opposed to BIR. It seems to me that the proposed methodology is necessary only to the extent that such a contradiction, in fact, exists.

BIR is offered as an alternative to a certain kind of methodological bracketing. Because Pohran never explicitly names this bracketing subtype, I will do so. Broadly construed, methodological bracketing may refer to any principle mandating that one set aside certain explicit beliefs or implicit assumptions about a given set of phenomena within a specific research context. There are more than two kinds of methodological bracketing, so defined, but just one distinction is essential here: that between bracketing performed in the course of writing and other theoretical analysis (i.e., "theoretical" bracketing) and bracketing performed interpersonally, in one's conversations with others (i.e., "interpersonal" bracketing). One kind of theoretical bracketing is performed when social scientists adopt the metaphysical assumptions of empirical science and, for the purpose of building a theoretical model, set aside personal religious beliefs or other articles of faith. Another occurs when ethnographers describe religious experiences from an "immanent" perspective, assuming the metaphysical beliefs of the culture they are studying while bracketing their own metaphysical assumptions. Although these are very different kinds of theoretical bracketing, they share the feature of being theoretical: they are limits on what kinds of beliefs may credibly inform theorizing about a given set of phenomena within a certain disciplinary context. In contrast, interpersonal bracketing merely limits what beliefs researchers may communicate to informants.

It is a straightforward analytic truth that theoretical bracketing does not imply interpersonal bracketing and vice versa. A norm of bracketing during theory development does not necessarily constrain one to bracket one's beliefs during conversations with informants. By the same logic, researchers who are candid about their beliefs in conversations with informants are not thereby constrained to eschew any and all theoretical bracketing during analysis. This observation means that although BIR is an alternative to interpersonal bracketing, it may be perfectly consistent with practices of theoretical bracketing. Pohran seems to acknowledge this and expressly denies that the BIR proposal is a criticism of (theoretical) bracketing in the "writing-up phases of research."

A second feature to notice about the BIR proposal is its modesty. Pohran does not advocate for BIR at all times but merely claims that "sometimes, some anthropologists should intentionally bring some of their own beliefs and doubts into the forefront of their ethnographic research" to better access data. From these two facts about Pohran's argument—(1) BIR is only an alternative to interpersonal bracketing and (2) only under some (unspecified) conditions—we may infer the following: the answer to whether BIR is a needed methodology turns on the questions of whether interpersonal bracketing is specifically mandated in all interactions with informants and whether such an expectation is fairly widespread among professional anthropologists. The existence of this—I will anachronistically call it "anti-BIR dogma"—is what Pohran must credibly establish if we are to conclude that a new BIR methodology is needed. Rhetorically, Pohran's article gives the impression that such an attitude is indeed prevalent among anthropologists. The problem is that the evidence supplied does not clearly support this claim.

Pohran seeks to establish that anthropology as a field has a norm of interpersonal bracketing. However, much of the evidence she cites in support of this claim is actually about theoretical bracketing and does not reveal any definite opposition to BIR. For instance, Pohran traces the roots of the alleged anti-BIR attitude to the methodological bracketing proposed by theorists like Husserl (1931), Heidegger (2010 [1927]), Berger (1974), and Geertz (2008). However, in the cited works, these theorists are all clearly speaking specifically and exclusively of theoretical forms of bracketing. Only a highly equivocal reading of these texts allows them to be interpreted as evidence of an anti-BIR attitude.

Consider first Husserl and Heidegger. It barely needs to be argued that they offer no guidance for what researchers ought to share in their interpersonal interactions. They are philosophers, and the bracketing for which they advocate is at the level of phenomenological interpretation, not interpersonal communication. Pohran also repeatedly cites Berger's (1974) identification of an "intrinsic limitation" in social scientific approaches to investigating religious phenomena. Yet it is clear from Berger's text that the described limitation is purely restricted to theoretical understanding. Berger in no way implies that researchers in the field ought to refuse to honestly discuss their personal views with participants. Indeed, he honestly affirms his own religious belief throughout the cited article. Next, Pohran moves on to Geertz's (2008) advice to "put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and the village preacher" (74), which she claims is in "direct opposition" to BIR. However, Pohran excludes the immediately preceding part of Geertz's sentence, which makes it clear that he is speaking of a theoretical concern with "*writing* about religion scientifically" (emphasis added). In fact, nothing about Geertz's argument for theoretical neutrality is opposed in principle to BIR. Finally, Pohran points to a "disciplinary unease" with BIR that she finds in Orsi (2016). However, Orsi's (2016:62–64) account in *History and Presence* actually contains a strong criticism of theoretical bracketing and no advice against BIR.

In short, much of the work that Pohran cites as anti-BIR teaching is not that at all. I am left to wonder to what extent there really is, in the current field of anthropology, a widespread anti-BIR sentiment.

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Any anthropologist or ethnographer of religion will be very familiar with a certain kind of fieldwork moment. It is that

moment when an interlocutor is sharing their experience and perspective of religious culture and we, as fieldworkers, are poised to respond. But how do we respond? Do we focus only on listening and perhaps confirming that we have understood the intended meaning? Do we ask follow-up questions to understand our local teachers better by drawing out further dimension and nuance? Do we reciprocate in some way, perhaps sharing something of our own experience and perspective? In light of such a reliable kind of moment and such ever-relevant ethnographic questions, we are fortunate to have Nadya Pohran's thoughtful reflection about the value of belief-inclusive research (BIR).

Pohran argues that ethnographic fieldwork is heightened when we do reciprocate, when we actively participate in dialogues about personal religiosity rather than adopt the stance of a reserved learner. Likewise, our research suffers when the practice of methodological atheism is not confined to analysis and writing but bleeds into the everyday conversations, relations, and events of fieldwork. I especially appreciate Pohran's robust sense of "shared belief," extending beyond doctrinal commitment and including "a shared quest for metaphysical truth." In the methodological model she outlines, bracketing truth claims might make sense in the social scientific presentation of research findings, but it makes much less sense and is far more likely to be obstructive amid the human-to-human moments that define the craft of ethnography.

Ultimately, I find Pohran's proposal to be thoroughly productive. If ethnography is substantially about cultivating relationships with other people, then we are typically better served if we let others into our lives and reciprocate the willingness to share what our vantage points on life are and why we are compelled by them. Honesty, transparency, vulnerability: on most occasions, in most contexts, these virtues will take us much further in building trust and mutual understanding than their opposites. In short, yes, BIR is convincing as a helpful model because it encourages ethnographers to communicate openly with the communities they hope to communicate meaningfully about.

Pohran is likely preaching to the converted in my case, as someone for whom dialogical methods have always been highly prized. If anything, I find the idea of rejecting BIR to be destined for ethnographic failure. To be candid, why should any community tolerate a nonreciprocal ethnographer? Why should anyone devote the time and (often intense) energy of sharing a lifeworld with someone who only ever consumes? The kind of bracketing during fieldwork Pohran describes is inherently extractive and likely socially clueless. The researcher who adopts this stance should not be surprised to find literal and figurative closed doors and, perhaps deservedly, fieldwork cut short. As Pohran notes with her work among charismatic Protestants, "any careful skirting around the question of metaphysical truth was simply dissatisfactory." If we are not game for sharing our experiences, commitments, doubts, and questions, why would we ever expect anyone else to do so for us? It is not scientific to practice belief-exclusive research; it is privileged and obnoxious.

While I am quite sympathetic with Pohran's proposal, I wonder whether it is presented too cautiously and too generically. In a key moment, her argument hedges at every turn. She writes: "I argue that sometimes, some anthropologists should intentionally bring some of their own beliefs and doubts into the forefront of their ethnographic research, thereby sometimes increasing their access to ethnographic data with some of their informants." If we were sharing a cup of coffee at a conference, my questions for the author would center on these multiple contingencies.

For example, I would love to hear the author expound on how the unevenness across fieldwork contexts is structured. That is, what cultural and situational factors help sort the division between which times are amenable to BIR, in which socioreligious settings, which fieldworkers are accountable and which are not, and which of their commitments, doubts, concerns, and questions are advisable to keep private? In other words, what are the conditions that help make BIR more or less encouraged, acceptable, risky, or appropriate?

Another generative discussion I would look forward to sharing with the author would center on the range of BIR strategies that fieldworkers might consider. Pohran is up-front that this article is not designed to be a how-to guide, which makes sense, but I would enjoy more in this very practical and very necessary direction. From a linguistic anthropology perspective, what local communicative genres might we use to practice belief inclusivity? Pohran makes the crucial observation that BIR has nothing to do with adopting the worldview of our interlocutors; it is not about agreement, not about trying to identify or conjure shared commitments. With this in mind, perhaps one strategy (among many!) might be something like generous argumentation? When it is appropriate vis-à-vis our social position in the field, we might mobilize our own commitments, doubts, and questions to challenge (respectfully and amiably, of course) our interlocutors, to engage them in some friendly theological and ethical debate in order to better understand their experience and perspective. In some contexts, this may even resonate with locally valued ways of interacting, drawing us further into the social intimacies that enrich ethnography.

Without reservation, I hope that our collective disciplinary future is replete with ethnographies of religion that embrace the posture of BIR. I do suspect that we already have many in our midst, but Nadya Pohran has done us all a service in making explicit and advocating for an approach that has perhaps been too implicit and maybe even too clandestine.

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I welcome this piece focused on the question of how the profession of "beliefs" in fieldwork can shape access to ethnographic data and the ethnographic encounter generally. Engaging the

question with theoretical and ethnographic nuance regarding how the decision to reveal one's positions vis-à-vis cosmological or doctrinal positions is a worthwhile exercise that Pohran explores with care. As an anthropologist of Christianity who is not only part of the Christian ecumene myself but also in an explicitly confessional institutional location, I have found this question engaging from the very beginning of my anthropological career. At the same time, reflecting on my own growth, change, and evolution as a religious adherent, I find that the question is a shifting and developing one, in both personal and disciplinary terms.

As Pohran recognizes, belief is far from a stable object. Our thoughts and feelings about the content and nature of the universe change, certainly over the long term but even from moment to moment (via "doubts," questions, paradoxes, and even just lack of enthusiasm). This instability is a key part of any human life and, in some ways, is built into the structure of large-scale religions, such as Christianity. Arguably, this is particularly heightened for those of us in the Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic and (post)modern contexts of an individualistic selfhood where personal choice and the need to continually evaluate one's religious subjectivity are persistently at the forefront. Choosing one's practices, social networks, language, and beliefs becomes an ever-present task in (re)creating religious commitment.

The observation that religious identity is a complex of practice, language, belief, and social context is certainly not confined to anthropology or secular social science. Confessional theologians and philosophers, too, have noted the problems of placing "belief" at the center of Christian life. Pohran acknowledges this in several ways, from her references to the questions around the sincerity of Christian identity faced by Webster (2013) in his work among fundamentalist Scottish fisherfolk to the shifting interpretations of her own positionality when participating in a healing ritual. Thus, while the overall argument for the ways self-revelation of one's "religious" or "spiritual" commitments can positively shape the ethnographic encounter is well taken, I continue to struggle with the category of belief as the best way to capture the positionality of faith and religious commitments.

In my own reflections on fieldwork as a Christian anthropologist (Howell 2007), I argued for the category of "commitment" as a framework superior to belief as that which best orients the relationship of the anthropologist and coreligionists in the field. I proposed this idea as one that would incorporate, as Pohran does in her argument, the habitus and affect of religious identity and practice in social life. Belief has the tendency, despite our qualifications, to draw our attention to the cognitive, systematic, and coherent forms of a religious "worldview" or doctrinal position. Pohran encourages anthropologists to make these positions explicit in the ethnographic encounter, and I have no disagreement with this position. At the same time, given the argument for a "belief-inclusive research" strategy, I want to explicitly bring the affective and practical into the frame.

In the 15 years since I argued for the centrality of commitment to the question of a Christian or religious subject position, I have come to see that it is necessary to nuance notions of commitment as well. I might now move even from the notion of commitment to one of desire as the more fundamental feature of a Christian life and that which should be foregrounded in the ethnographic encounter.

Desire has been fruitfully brought into anthropology from Deleuze (see, e.g., Deleuze 2006; also Biehl and Locke 2010) as that which is prior to power and, in many ways, the context for what can be understood as belief (insofar as that category encompasses the doctrines and ideas extrapolated through institutionally affirmed texts and traditions). But desire is also a foundational Christian orientation, as developed in the early movement (e.g., Augustine 2018) and elaborated in recent philosophical and theological work (see, e.g., Smith 2009), as that which is most directive of Christian practice and subjectivity. This interpolates well with the concept of commitment, although perhaps it provides even more space for the elaboration of the Christian subject in motion that arrives at any social intersection, such as that of the ethnographic encounter.

Anthropology is a hard sell in the current climate of the US educational system. Compared with programs in business, medicine, and other preprofessional fields, anthropology appears abstract, at best, and frivolous, at worst. In promoting the study of anthropology to my undergraduates, I often foreground the skills of ethnography as the "practical" side they can carry into any and every vocation they may have. For this reason, it is a very good thing to elaborate the dimensions of this critical activity so definitive of our field. In my own case and for millions of others around the world, this means grappling with the positionality of doing ethnography as an avowed Christian. Thus, I offer these remarks not principally as a corrective to Pohran's thought-provoking piece here but as an extension of the conversation that I very much hope will continue.

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In recent years, the dialogue between anthropology and theology has been flourishing (Lemons 2018; Meneses et al. 2014; Robbins 2020), along with increased introspection about the Christian identities of social anthropologists themselves (Larsen 2014; Meneses 2021). Pohran puts a specifically methodological spin on these debates, raising the question of "shared belief" during the fieldwork process. She argues that, through including their own "beliefs and doubts" in interactions with their interlocutors, anthropologists can gain more ethnographic "data" than if they had methodologically bracketed them out.

At one level, it is hard to quibble with Pohran's highly positioned and caveated claim: in some settings, some anthropologists might sometimes find it generative to voice their own beliefs and so find common ground with their interlocutors. In

Pohran's Indian ashram field site—where people were seriously engaging with personal spiritual quests—it is entirely conceivable that anthropologist and interlocutor might be united by an "existential openness to the category of belief itself." When both parties value "belief" in the same way, such sharing could logically lead to a more profound exchange and so to deeper ethnographic understanding.

Generally speaking, conversations in the field do feel especially fruitful when there is mutual, tacit acknowledgment that both sides value similar categories. For instance, during my own fieldwork in Serbia, I have found Orthodox priests to be willing, eager, and loquacious interlocutors. This is in no small part because we are both professionally interested in "thinking about" religion in intellectual terms, albeit from very different perspectives.

However, while there are real grounds for thinking that anthropologists might do well to tone down their rigidly secular stance (see also Stewart 2001), some might find framing the discussion in terms of belief problematic. Belief is an extremely slippery concept. Within anthropology there is longstanding dissatisfaction about its analytical use for capturing "religious" phenomena (Lindquist and Coleman 2008; see also Needham 1972). How comfortable are we characterizing ourselves and our interlocutors in terms of beliefs?

As Pohran herself acknowledges, "belief-inclusive research" (BIR) would be effective only in "contexts where belief is deemed . . . to be a uniquely indispensable aspect of life." I would add, more specifically, that such potential consensus between anthropologist and interlocutor depends on belief being a relevant local cultural category to which people choose to relate self-reflexively and discursively. Moreover, BIR also depends on how anthropologists conceive of their own religious identity: asserting beliefs and doubts (and a willingness to muse on them inquiringly and openly) is only one very particular way (among others) of cultivating oneself as a religious subject. There is, in short, a particular "representational politics" at play in characterizing people as "believers" that has to be unpacked (Lindquist and Coleman 2008:8).

These initial thoughts lead me to three basic reflections. First, Pohran's approach partly hinges on the extent to which people are ready to (ecumenically) set aside doctrinal difference and consider the abstract value of belief, per se. Not all religious practitioners choose to intellectualize belief. Among the Orthodox Christian laity I studied, explicit discussions about what people believed were quite rare. That is not to suggest that Orthodoxy does not have a discourse about "sincere belief" (it does) but rather that belief claims could often remain implicit and unvoiced. The priority among practicing Orthodox is witnessing faith, doing. This involves regular fasting, attending the Liturgy, lighting candles, saying prayers for the dead, and celebrating saints' days. It is living and embodying faith that are seen as the truest expression of faith (Hann and Goltz 2010:15–16; see also Carroll 2018:90–91). Methodologically, then, what matters in such contexts is not so much shared belief but rather shared practice and participation. To what extent are you willing to refrain from eating meat during fasting periods, stand through services, venerate icons and relics, prostrate yourself? Many of the more committed churchgoers I know would argue that vocal assertions of belief are quite hollow if they are not coupled with action.

Second, belief is not always the currency that affords inclusion or exclusion. Boundaries perceived in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, or initiation may be deemed uncrossable, irrespective of how well dispositioned the anthropologist. Pohran's primary concern is that a lack of shared belief can prohibit access to ethnographic material. She gives us concrete examples from her own fieldwork where this has been the case. However, regardless of why we might be excluded, it is worth adding that being prevented from observing, from participating, is also "data." It reveals much about perceived borders that are in place and about how our interlocutors might conceive of certain religious experiences as hermetic. It is illuminating to interrogate why something is not shared.

This point about the limits of inclusivity brings me to my final reflection. Pohran (rightly) observes that—regardless of what we actually think—our interlocutors inevitably make up their own minds anyway. However, this seems to undercut her core argument slightly, as it recognizes that local perceptions of (what people assume to be) our socioreligious viewpoints may simply outweigh anthropological openness. Eagerness for sharing may come to nothing if our interlocutors have themselves bracketed out that possibility.

However, that very lack of shared belief can also lead to productive and fulfilling encounters in the field. In my own experience, what matters is a willingness to engage in everyday shared conversation and to voice an opinion even—indeed, especially—when it is known that viewpoints are not shared. People understandably find it peculiar to be observed by a self-avowedly impartial outsider whom they know has—yet refrains from stating—an opinion. And in contexts where political and religious issues are prevalent in the public sphere, an anthropologist's unwillingness to comment can seem perplexing, to say the least. Debating and arguing both sides can deepen their knowledge of the other. For me, a major message of Pohran's article is her reutterance of the point that anthropological neutrality is impossible, coupled with her convincing claim that it is not desirable, either.

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Pohran's proposal of a fieldwork method for gaining access to data by having ethnographers share their own (especially religious or metaphysical) beliefs and doubts with interlocutors is carefully qualified. She suggests that it should be used in

some contexts but not all, be based on points of agreement, and be a matter of data collection, not necessarily analysis or writing. Why use it at all? Because at least some interlocutors will distrust an ethnographer who seems to hold no views on matters of importance and will more likely provide access to information and practices to an ethnographer who takes belief seriously. Pohran answers the major objection: What if the ethnographer does not share interlocutors' beliefs? Leaving unanswered the matter of pretending to believe, Pohran suggests that the ethnographer search for a wider area of agreement and thereby demonstrate an interest in the pursuit of metaphysical truth.

I am very much in agreement with the overall thrust of this argument. Ethnographers' silence, like the silence in any relationship, is "not left unnoticed by their informants." So I have the following comments to offer for advancing the conversation on this proposal: First, I think that we can explore further the matter of which situations would usefully entail this kind of self-revelation and which would not. Then, I suggest that the matter of doubting is qualitatively different from the matter of believing and should be handled differently as a result. Finally, I propose that even disagreement, rather than remaining silent, can be useful in the formation of relationships.

First is the matter of when and how ethnographers' beliefs should be offered. There are two partially interrelated issues here: the degree or intensity of commitment to a belief and the nature of the belief itself. To address the latter issue first, beliefs vary in content, from the nature of the divine to the best way to boil potatoes. Pohran is addressing religious beliefs, but I think that the larger question of revealing one's own views in relationships with interlocutors is relevant across the board. In fact, we may find useful points in lesser issues that can be applied to greater ones. That is, knowing how to negotiate relationships in the kitchen may assist us in negotiating them elsewhere. Furthermore, the intensity of the belief we discover can be high or low in any particular arena, depending on its perceived value to interlocutors. We all know to keep quiet when another person is too angry to listen. But we also know that our relationships will suffer if we do not speak at some point. Thus, it would seem that the ethnographer's best option is to view the building of relationships as an art form, carefully selecting the best moments for listening to the other and those for speaking from their own viewpoint.

Then, although Pohran uses the phrase "beliefs and doubts" throughout the article, I do not think that they can be so easily equated. Clearly, the point of including doubts is to allow for the vulnerability that the expression of doubts can encourage in a conversation. But I wonder whether this is not a particularly Western and even Protestant value. (Pohran herself notes the connection between Protestantism and belief.) Many interlocutors, especially from non-Western or traditional cultures, are likely to see doubt as detrimental, even dangerous, to belief—as did Pohran's own interlocutors. I am not suggesting that doubt should never be expressed but rather that its impact will be quite different depending on cultural views of what doubt is and what its value is. There is a celebration of doubt in the West that is not shared everywhere.

Finally, I would like to suggest that there can actually be value in disagreement between the ethnographer and the interlocutor. First, this can solve the honesty problem. I do not think that pretending, much less lying, is ever ethical. But from a purely pragmatic point of view, most people can tell when their listener does not agree. This is not to suggest that the ethnographer must express an opinion on all subjects at every point. But again, when social life is viewed as an art form, a friendly debate or honest disagreement can both deepen the relationship and allow the parties involved to know one another better. Thus, I think that Pohran's suggested alteration of anthropology's method can be taken further than she herself recommends.

Pohran briefly raises what is perhaps the most important consideration. If ethnographers begin to share their own fiduciary commitments rather than just collect them from others, what will become of anthropology's purpose in describing cultures? Is not methodological bracketing constitutive of the discipline? As she points out, others have raised this question too. I would suggest that if, following Gadamer (2013), we view the social sciences as disciplinary conversations and if, following Viveiros de Castro (2014), we wish to take the other seriously, then we do need to share our beliefs, values, and commitments in the context of fieldwork and in the interpretation, analysis, and writing up of ethnographies. There is a holding back that is necessary to allow another person to speak freely. But this is usually followed in normal relationships by a time to speak and to honestly declare our own viewpoints. Doing so is an act of vulnerability since the other may disagree with us or remark on our shortcomings or shortsightedness. But that is the vulnerability that we want, one that produces relationships that are valuable in their own right while at the same time producing ethnographic data. Anthropology as a discipline has always been constituted by its interpretive function between cultures, including the culture of the anthropologist (as Pohran notes at the end). This does not preclude anthropology from being a science. It simply characterizes our science, as Geertz (1973) suggested, as a conversation about matters important to human beings.

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The central question of Pohran's stimulating article is how we might get better at studying other people's religious beliefs and practices. She claims that this could be achieved by renouncing the long-standing ideal of "neutrality." Where ethnographers try hard to remain neutral (i.e., silent) about their own beliefs, people sometimes react by being secretive: assuming the ethnographer to be uninterested in or unfit for receiving certain information, they keep their beliefs and practices to themselves.

Speaking about one's own beliefs can therefore be a way of gaining trust and access.

That this may "sometimes (for some etc.)" be true is a claim one can hardly disagree with. Indeed, I assume that even ethnographers strongly committed to the ideal of neutrality in practice sometimes end up speaking about their own beliefs. For if the people you study really care to know your thoughts, they will find ways of drawing you out. And since fieldwork is a matter of give-and-take, refusing a response would simply be rude. So I agree with Pohran that there are situations in which it is neither possible nor desirable to enact a stance of neutrality.

My disagreement concerns promoting self-disclosure to the rank of a "methodological posture" if this means speaking about one's beliefs "intentionally and regularly," as Pohran suggests that she did in her own fieldwork. Thus conceived, "belief-inclusive research" (BIR) raises the risk of misrepresentation and entails excessive self-centeredness in ethnographic writing.

One way of making my point about misrepresentation would be by noting that Pohran avoids mentioning why scholars like Geertz advocated neutrality in the first place. Reflecting a broader concern with not "distorting" the field, the idea behind neutrality is that if you talk a great deal about your own views, this can affect the views expressed by your informants. For example, having learned of the ethnographer's religious commitments or antipathies, people may answer questions not by stating their own ideas but by saying what they know will please the ethnographer. So what you end up reporting as the local beliefs risks being partly an artifact of your own loquacity.

This point could also be made by noting that the idiom of "data" so conspicuous in Pohran's article is misleading (not only, but especially) when it comes to studying religious beliefs. Implied by the idiom is a conception of (1) beliefs as propositions stored inside the informant's mind and (2) ethnography as the task of unlocking this treasure trove so as to "access" and "collect" the data stored within. What this overlooks is that beliefs often get fully formed only in the process of being articulated. Speaking with Charles Taylor (1995:97), the function of language here is not "designative" but "expressive": it is in the course of speaking about your beliefs that you discover what they are. (Pohran unwittingly acknowledges this point when she explains that one of her reasons for using BIR was "to explore and articulate the spectrum of my own beliefs and doubts.") The implication is that beliefs take shape at least partly in relation to that which prompts their articulation. And since what we wish to learn about are people's beliefs as they take shape and play out in their own way of life, it is better to wait patiently for people to talk about their beliefs on their own impetus, responding to illness, for instance, or quibbling among themselves over the tenets of their faith. Trying to prompt articulation by holding forth about one's beliefs raises the risk of misrepresentation.

My second reason for opposing BIR follows from the first: if anthropologists spoke much about their beliefs during fieldwork, they would also have to do so in their publications. This would be necessary to contextualize the informants' statements and to allow readers to gauge how far these statements could have been affected by the anthropologist's declarations of belief. This strikes me as an unfortunate consequence: the point of reading ethnographies, for me at least, lies in learning not about the author but about the people. Although it is good and necessary for authors to offer some information about themselves, this should be kept to a minimum. BIR points in the opposite direction, entailing increased self-centeredness in ethnographic writing.

My final objection to BIR concerns the second half of Pohran's proposition: not only that researchers should talk "intentionally and frequently" about their own beliefs but also that it would even be desirable if there were some degree of shared belief between researcher and informants. This suggestion, too, is motivated by improving trust and access: having some kind of shared belief, Pohran claims, will help "overcome the existing barriers that have been preventing our informants from sharing truthfully in interview settings." One need not share Pohran's pessimism about informants' truthfulness to agree that it might in some sense be easier to carry out research among people who are relatively similar to yourself. But this also raises the question about the proper aims of anthropology. I would maintain that anthropology has generated some of its finest insights by working through situations of cultural difference. And I share Joel Robbins's (2013) worry that "we anthropologists have lost hold of the cultural point and the critical potential of the notion of difference that it once allowed us to realize in our work" (447). Adopting BIR would mean taking yet another step away from appreciating cultural difference as the motor of anthropology. It may be more challenging to study people who hold beliefs very different from your own. But it is also more worthwhile.

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As conversations between anthropologists and theologians increase, Nadya Pohran's "Belief-Inclusive Research" offers a timely contribution (Lemons 2018; Meneses and Bronkema 2017; Robbins 2006, 2019). The traditional anthropological value of "bracketing out" personal religious beliefs, Pohran argues, can compromise fieldwork relations. Outside the strictest positivist standards, the kinds of objectivity to which mainstream anthropology aspires (i.e., those eschewing universality for particular and embedded truths) are still achievable through what Pohran calls belief-inclusive research (BIR). Indeed, BIR can bolster researcher-informant relations in ways that make otherwise inaccessible data accessible. For Pohran, BIR does not require that ethnographers share informants' doctrinal beliefs, though. Rather, we only have to share the belief that belief itself matters.

This might sound like a low bar to set. Surely, believing that belief matters should not be controversial enough to require defense. But historical disciplinary polemics between anthropological and theological studies of religion require scholars of each to demonstrate that they have not crossed the border to the other. For some, Pohran's argument might risk the proverbial slippery slope. Others will welcome her revelation of how porous these disciplinary borders already are. Speaking from this latter camp, my comments here intend to bolster the rupture Pohran's BIR makes.

Questioning anthropology's implicit secular ontology is not new, as Pohran notes (Asad 1973, 2003; Fountain 2013; Goulet and Young 1994; Povinelli 1995). Indigenous scholars particularly have critiqued Western epistemological hegemony in anthropological knowledge construction (Denzin, Lincoln, and Tuhiwai Smith 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Wilson 2008). Yet Pohran presupposes such trajectories without adequately grappling with their critique of (1) Christian theology's complicity in constructing and disseminating epistemologies imposed through European expansion or (2) the continuation of these influences on anthropological ways of knowing. "Belief" may have been adequately decentralized within anthropology to allow its return to the conversation, as Pohran claims. But this return must happen in a critical mode—that is, not just for trust building but also for coconstituting religious knowledge across difference (a pursuit Pohran brackets). For this to be generative, though, we would need to grapple with what belief even is. How might BIR increase our cross-cultural understanding of belief's coconstitutive relationship with practice? How might it help us explore belief as one way of knowing among many?

Questions about the nature of belief become concerning precisely when BIR's use is restricted to the field. For example, take Pohran's desire to attend Maureen's healing ceremony, which she describes as "crucial in increasing my understanding of the phenomenon." Maureen's community believes that if someone who believes wrongly (i.e., Pohran) is present at the ritual, they can become a conduit for—and thereby possessed by—evil spirits. Pohran undergoes the appropriate cleansing rites to be able to attend, but she does so without conforming to community norms for how belief should function within them. After Maureen's healing ritual, then, the healers regret allowing Pohran's attendance because it "changed the atmosphere substantially and was likely the reason that the healing had not been as efficacious as had been hoped for." Pohran is concerned with what she "might have missed" had she not attended. I am concerned with what Maureen might have missed—that is, healing—because she did.

In this narrative, Pohran treats belief as an opinion we can openly and respectfully disagree about without doing harm to ourselves and others. In other words, she treats belief in a scholarly way rather than with the status of, say, gnosis, as her informants do. For them belief is not merely an expression of an arguable viewpoint about spiritual reality; belief, rather, has the power to shape spiritual reality. So what if Pohran's belief ontology is wrong and her informants' is right? There is an ethical catch-22 here. If we admit that the community could be right, then Pohran risked doing harm by participating in their ritual. If we do not admit that they could be right, we impose our secular ontology onto their ways of knowing. This dilemma arises when BIR is used for trust building rather than knowledge cocreation, as noted above. It also has implications when BIR's use is restricted to the field and not used in the text.

Pohran makes this restriction for clear disciplinary reasons. Were she to "interrogat[e] whether or not anthropologists should weigh in on such questions in their writing-up phases of research," she would come dangerously close to theological terrain. To be fair, though, theologians grapple with this issue too. The relationship between empirical descriptions and normative theological claims is fraught at best, as ethnographic theologians have significantly debated (Ideström and Kaufman 2018; Kaufman 2015; Watkins 2020; Wigg-Stevenson 2015, 2021). There is a world of difference between writing that the informants thought that Pohran's wrong belief impacted the rite and saying that her wrong belief did impact it, though. And between those poles, we could write a claim like "it is possible that her wrong belief had an impact." How we write the field matters, and each of these phrases writes belief with varying degrees of ontological humility and openness. Carrying BIR over to the writing might, therefore, help orient its fieldwork use in some generative ways.

In closing, a note on anthropology and its theological interlocutors. As Fountain (2013) argues, anthropologists have a strange fascination with John Milbank's (2006) polemics for their primary theological foil. So, on the one hand, I appreciate how Pohran expands the interlocutor circle to Morse. On the other hand, though, her description of his "faithful disbelief" as "particularly helpful and thought-provoking" belies the fact that it is a fairly innocuous view within theological discourse—evidenced by the fact that Morse's book is used as a standard survey text for "Intro to Theology" courses. I hope that it is not simply vanity speaking when I suggest that theologically engaged anthropologists consider widening their circles of engagement to theologians who actually share their ethnographic approaches (like those named above). I am not suggesting that Pohran jump ship to our shores (although she is more than welcome!). But by engaging the issue a little closer to the water's edge, we might be able to nuance its contours together even more.

Reply

Practicing Authenticity and Empathy in Qualitative Research: Reflecting on My Belief-Inclusive Research Theory Five Years Later

The task to reflect on my original article is aided by two developments—first, the erudite and thoughtful responses of

seven colleagues and, second, the time that has passed since I first drafted this article in 2016–2017. I recall putting pen to paper as a second-year PhD student while conducting fieldwork in the wonderfully scenic Sat Tal Christian Ashram in northern India. Earlier iterations of this article had surfaced in my mind while I was writing my MA thesis in 2014–2015—spurred on by the experiences of fieldwork with charismatic Christians that I reference in the article.

I emphasize the fact that I was a student while forming this article because I think that some elements of my argument—and, indeed, what I did not argue—were influenced by where I was in the academic ecosystem. I was (and in many ways, still am) a junior scholar, and in my juniority, I regularly practiced a form of shape-shifting while navigating academia. Imposter syndrome is particularly rampant in graduate student spheres, especially among women, and when we fear that our ideas might be perceived as inadequate, we often forcefully remold our thoughts to the form in which we think they will be most likely to be received.

In my case, I presented what could be considered a utilitarian argument for belief-inclusive research (BIR). This utilitarian slant is one of the aspects of my article that strikes me most strongly as I return to it.[11] To be clear: I did and still do genuinely believe that adopting BIR is useful because of the ways that it can access types of qualitative data that would otherwise be inaccessible.[12] But what I did not manage to graft into my article were the ways in which I feel that conducting BIR is a worthwhile practice of authenticity. I explore authenticity in more detail below, but, in brief, we can understand it as a way of self-reflectively knowing our own beliefs and then intentionally choosing to disclose our beliefs to others without an egoistic need to correct others' beliefs or be accepted by others. This kind of authenticity can strengthen human-human relationships (of which researcher-informant relationships are but a small part) and is therefore worthwhile in its own right in our interpersonal interactions.

While BIR May Be Utilitarian, It Is Also Shaped by a Desire for Authenticity

I strongly feel that bringing our holistic selves into interpersonal dynamics is a necessary foundation for nurturing meaningful relationships. As such, I think that many social scientific researchers will benefit from intentionally practicing BIR throughout our fieldwork—at least as much as feels pragmatically possible and socially acceptable. As far as what counts as socially acceptable, I think that our guiding post should be the societies in which and the individuals with whom we conduct our fieldwork—not, or at least not primarily, the anthropology classrooms and seminars in which we have been raised, socialized, and shaped as researchers. I will return to this point about being guided by our informants below since different societies and different people within those societies will naturally have different levels of comfort with this type of relational vulnerability.[13]

When conducting fieldwork with various Protestant Christian groups, I found that, time and time again, when it came to disclosing my own beliefs and doubts, I defaulted to letting my actions be influenced more by my anthropological mentors (e.g., "Don't tell your informants XYZ about your own stance") and less by my informants (e.g., "But what is it you believe?"). But crucially, I am finding that unless we allow these norms to be at least somewhat shaped by our informants' norms—that is, to be open and ready as researchers to being authentic and vulnerable if and when the opportunity presents itself—we are falling short not just as researchers who are trying to cultivate relationships and access data but, more fundamentally, as human beings who are seeking to form meaningful relationships. To echo James Bielo's response, it would be "privileged and obnoxious" to imperiously refuse to share our own "experiences, commitments, doubts, and questions" when we are expecting (indeed, requiring!) others to do the same.

Contexts That Have Shaped My Opinions of Authenticity

My PhD work has positioned my scholarship to be doubly interstitial—I locate myself at the intersection of anthropology and theology when it comes to methodology ("form") and at the intersection of Hinduism and Christianity when it comes to topic ("matter"). It is through my work in Hindu-Christian studies, and along with it the study of interreligious relations and multiple religious orientations, that I have come to deeply cherish the practice of authenticity.

Part of why I am so drawn to authenticity is that it is the birthplace of connection and belonging—something that many people who navigate multiple religious orientations are centrally concerned with (Pohran 2022). Belonging, in turn, is a phenomenon that we all require so as to feel truly at home in the world—something publicly renowned researchers like Brené Brown have articulated and brought into public awareness. Although not all qualitative researchers are seeking to experience such forms of belonging in the midst of research

11. With gratitude to one of the anonymous peer reviewers of the article, who highlighted the utilitarian aspect. The reviewer's comments and questions forced me to reflect on why I had chosen to set aside other angles of argument for BIR and focus nearly exclusively on the utilitarian angle.

12. This being said, I wholeheartedly agree with Nicholas Lackenby's point in his response that if and when a researcher is not allowed to be present for certain rituals, this moment is its own type of informative data. This observation further bolsters my point that we need multiple vantage points in qualitative research.

13. I am using the word "vulnerability" in the way that people like Brené Brown or Jean Vanier use it. Vulnerability, in this sense, is when someone feels so comfortable with others that they do not feel the need to maintain an emotional or psychological "armor." They can be fully themselves, without hiding or masking select components of themselves.

projects, I suspect that, for those of us who indeed do, we will find that welcoming a practice of authenticity via research positionalities such as BIR will be a crucial step toward building a sense of belonging and forming meaningful relationships with informants.

Furthermore, I think that authenticity is especially pertinent when operating in religious contexts where belief is prominent—as my article highlights in more detail, I understand Protestant Christian contexts to be ones where the disclosure of beliefs plays a particularly important role in forming connection. In arguing for BIR, I focused on the ways through which we can disclose our beliefs—but there are all sorts of other aspects of our lives that we could bring into our fieldwork conversations (again, if and when it feels pragmatically possible and socially acceptable) to cultivate authenticity. The question that then emerges, as Bielo articulated, is how do we do this? Thankfully, I think that we have some "how-to guides" within the discipline of theology, specifically within the field of comparative theology (CT).

Francis X. Clooney (2010, 2017), who is often referred to as one of the preeminent practitioners of CT, saw his own (Roman Catholic) inquiry into certain Hindu texts and traditions to be a practice of continually opening up. CT involves first deeply knowing one's situational standpoint, searching deeply, with an open mind, into the standpoints of others, and allowing one's own views to be challenged and even transformed through that relational interaction. Indeed, Clooney (2017) spoke of CT as requiring a "rootedness in one tradition while cultivating deeper openness to another" (113). This is a practice of authenticity.

Now, as some of my colleagues within the Theology without Walls (TWW) circles have pointed out, not all theological inquiry is done from the rootedness of a singular tradition (Diller 2016; Feldmeier 2017; McEntee 2016). Rather, some engage in theological questions either from the point of multiple religious traditions or even from a place of being not strongly rooted (or at least not identifiably rooted) in any religious tradition but nonetheless being strongly rooted in distinctive worldviews and convictions (Soars and Pohran 2022).

Piecing together these insights from CT and TWW, I suggest that dialogue about religion, especially religions deeply concerned with matters of belief, necessitates our ability to first deeply know our own selves and then act and share with informants from that deep place of self-knowledge. In other words, it necessitates authenticity that is enacted within and expressed through spaces of relationality.

The Positive Repercussions of Practicing Authenticity

When we practice authenticity (and intentionally create a space so that others can do the same), we become increasingly skillful at being comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, in a way that is similar to what comparative theologians are called to do. After all, the purpose of a CT exchange is not to decisively convert or to convince the other but to learn and reflect on another's way of being in contexts of interpersonal reciprocity. In this dialogical exchange, authenticity is pivotal.

Authenticity in self encourages authenticity in others. Theologians who practice authenticity often find that they are inspired to reexamine or deepen their own opinions. For anthropologists, this promise is vital because when we are willing to vulnerably lay bare our own beliefs and doubts to others through a practice of authenticity, we are crafting an environment of epistemic hospitality in which others might just be equally willing to share their own nuanced beliefs with us. And lest I default back to the utilitarian slants of my initial article, in which either theologians or anthropologists gain something for their disciplinary craft, I can add that authenticity plays a positive role for every human being in communion because when we practice authenticity, we enter into relational encounters that deepen our sense of belonging and connection. Given that an anthropologist is an *anthropos*, the dogmatic exclusion of *logos* (in the theological sense) from the Euro-American disciplinary matrices of anthropology is tantamount to pretending that anthropologists are somehow exempt from the very human experiences that we study—for example, of belonging, of cosmic orientation, of the ties that bind us (i.e., *religare*).

In this vein, and returning to the guidance of CT and TWW, qualitative researchers can disclose our own opinions—including our beliefs—without requiring others to hold on to the same opinions or indeed to even agree with the rationales that have formed our own opinions. This very act is the "sharing" that I wrote of in the article and that, on reading some of the responses, I now realize was a nuance that could be missed. To be clear: I am calling on researchers to share (i.e., to divulge and disclose) our own specific religious beliefs and doubts as an existential gesture to show that we share (i.e., hold the same) some metabeliefs of our informants: namely, we agree that there is worth and value in being truly concerned with matters of personal belief, for such belief is expressed through and underpins our modes of being in the world. When we practice this authenticity, we can cultivate a space for immense and sometimes intense difference without casting judgments of exclusion. Discomfort, if and when it does inevitably arise as a result of the differences that are dialogically revealed, is met with compassion and empathy both for ourselves and for the others with whom we are engaging.

The empathy that I am calling for is not just the intellectual or ratiocinative understanding of another's viewpoint that is so often championed and spoken of in our introductory texts on anthropology—for example, the Teutonic Verstehen. Rather, empathy is both cognitive and affective. The cognitive element of empathy allows us to put ourselves in others' conceptual shoes to understand why they act, think, feel, speak, eat, celebrate, educate, marry, raise children, revere their dead (and a whole host of other areas of anthropological inquiries) in the ways that they do. But affective empathy, as I have written about elsewhere, is an emotive exercise grounded in "feeling with" (literally, *em-pathos*) the other (Pohran et al. 2020).

Anthropologists are known for our cognitive empathy, but our disciplinary training does not seem to emphasize the value of affective empathy. How are we to "feel with" others when we strategically bracket out parts of ourselves? Affective empathy deepens our practice of authenticity, which thus deepens our capacity for connection.

BIR Should Remain an Option for the Researcher rather than a Demand of Research

While I think that the discipline of anthropology will benefit from providing anthropologists with the option of BIR, I do not prescribe that all researchers should be constantly enacting BIR throughout their research. Many of my colleagues' written responses asked questions related to this second point. Specifically, they questioned my use of multiple hedges in my phrase "I argue that sometimes, some anthropologists should intentionally bring some of their own beliefs and doubts into the forefront of their ethnographic research, thereby sometimes increasing their access to ethnographic data with some of their informants." One likely influencing factor for this tentativeness is my agnostic-shaped tendency to resist dogmatic certainties and to eschew anything resembling a rigid one-size-fits-all solution. But a more in-depth answer for my highlighting of multiplicities is wrapped up in certain posthumanist conceptualizations of power and the need to constantly allow our decisions to be cocreated by the social contexts in which we operate.

Importantly, not all contexts are ones where it would be appropriate to disclose one's own beliefs and doubts. As Eloise Meneses points out in her response, this truth is not limited to contexts of research but is also true in the flow of everyday conversations—we sometimes prolong our pauses to allow others to speak or vice versa. But drawing on this comparison to everyday conversations, I would add that large-scale social movements in recent years have highlighted, in unprecedented ways, the power dynamics that are at play in the everyday. As Indigenous scholars have argued in great detail, it is sometimes extremely inappropriate for researchers to center themselves in conversation with informants (Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

While I have borrowed from CT and TWW to create some of the "how-to" for anthropologists to enact BIR, anthropologists will further benefit from collaborating with scholars in poststructural fields and Indigenous studies to learn more of the nuances of when and how to allow our instincts for dialogue to be shaped by the communities we conduct research with. Knowing that it is not always an appropriate action is a main reason for my tentativeness regarding prescribing BIR.

A second reason is contained within Lackenby's point that belief "is not always the currency that affords inclusion or exclusion." In contexts where belief is notably unimportant, it would indeed feel somewhat pompous and vain—and also just a tad comical—to regularly and intentionally insert my own beliefs and doubts about a certain religious matter. In such contexts, I would encourage researchers to seek out the "currency of inclusion" that is important and to decipher and discern what type of authenticity they could practice to deepen the relationships they are forging in a particular setting.

There are more points of critical reflection—some that bolster BIR and some that disassemble it—contained within the scholars' responses that I could not speak to in a single response. I hope that in highlighting the argument of authenticity and contextualizing it more explicitly within the various strands of thought from a number of theologians, my responses will help to further develop this very interesting conversation. That being said, I know that among many anthropologists there remains a deep-seated reluctance to engage with the works of theologians, and I have thus selected my engagements (everywhere from Morse in the original to Clooney and various Theologians without Walls in this response) with theology in a way that I hope anthropologists can receive. After all, a bridge between distinct disciplines is only good as it remains useful enough to be walked over, and both heavy-duty jargon and in-depth diving without the necessary foundations can have the capacity to break the bridge. I, for one, hope that both anthropologists and theologians continue to walk across this dual-disciplinary bridge for many more years (and articles) to come.

—Nadya Pohran

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