

SOAS, Dept. Study of Religions announces a workshop:

Religionising Fieldwork and Fieldworking Religion

Hermeneutics of the engagement between religion and research methodologies in the field

3-4 November 2008

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Convenors:

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Keynote address:

Prof. Paul Gifford, Chair of African Christianity, SOAS, Dept. Study of Religions

Fieldwork is the arena within which we negotiate and integrate theoretical understanding and practical study of religion in the concrete world. From the perspective of religious studies, such an encounter between patterns of faith and practice and the discourse of ethnography is increasingly coming to determine the nature and validity of the research projects we undertake

In adopting the practice of fieldwork as a necessary step for any investigation on religion, we come to re-think theories and methods and to re-assess them in the light of experiences (and “surprises”) encountered in the field. Because in this way the practice of fieldwork often compels the junior researcher to re-examine analytical theorems and theoretical structures acquired in various disciplinary trainings (history, anthropology, sociology, ethnology, philosophy), and also their assumptions about the nature of the object of study, we judge the theme of our workshop to be central importance to the successful planning of doctoral research projects.

As the title suggests, this workshop aims to address the new challenges that students face in approaching fieldwork as a discourse in the Study of Religions (“religionising fieldwork”), and in engaging religion in the field (“fieldworking religion”).

Workshop Objectives

This workshop will serve as training for PhD students coming from different disciplines and whose research on religion involves fieldwork as a central component, and as an occasion to share and discuss issues about theory and practice of field-research.

This forum will also present an opportunity to promote a dialogue between SOAS Dept. Study of Religions and a number of students and scholars from other institutions.

By inviting speakers with different disciplinary approaches (such as anthropology, sociology and history of religion), we hope to encourage deeper critical reflection in the field of religious studies on classical and new methods of conducting fieldwork. In this way we aim to open up a broader debate on the necessity and modalities of the practice of intensive fieldwork in the light of post-modern and poststructuralist discourse on the field of Religious Studies.

Also, through the presentation of specific case studies that cover various geographical areas and religious traditions we hope to contribute to a pool of research that is 'process reflexive' and that speaks of both the 'religious' and the 'religionist' observer.

It is expected that the papers presented at the workshop will form the basis of a peer reviewed publication. Plans are in hand to make this possible.

Call for Papers

The organisers invite proposals for papers that explore reflexive methodologies of fieldwork on religious subjects. Research on any religious traditions and on any region will be considered. Only PhD students who have returned from an intense period (6 months minimum) of fieldwork or those who have just completed their doctoral degree are eligible to submit abstracts.

Proposals should address one of the following four topics:

- Representing Persons

The role and agency of the 'religious' individual or personality are a recognised object of study of the scholar of the Study of Religion. This session aims to explore how the interactions, dialogue and encounters between the researcher and the 'researched' can reshape and redefine the production of representations of religion. Papers are invited that explore the role of personalities, personal relationships and ideas of 'personhood' encountered in the field.

- Engaging Institutions

During a study in the field, the investigation of religion very often entails an encounter between the individual, and his or her research agenda, and the power and authority of institutions. Papers in this section should address the fieldworker's interaction with religious institutions and institutional religion and reflect on theoretical frameworks for approaching religion as institution.

- Animating Text

Texts and scriptures are often at the centre of lived religious experience, and as such are part of a material and social reality. Papers for this session should explore beyond the philological study of text into areas that address the relationship of the researcher to his 'text', such as its ethnographic context or its locatedness in community.

- Reading Performance

Performance is used here in the broadest sense to refer to a general orientation towards religious activity and the 'doing of religion'. This may encompass everyday individual human action on a micro level to large scale spectacle such as the drama of liturgy or pilgrimage. Papers in this session should address questions that arise from the presence of the fieldworker on the context and conditions of performance, such as the fieldworker as sponsor or catalyst for performance, or the fieldworker as performer.

Submission deadline

Abstracts of 500 words must be submitted via email by 31 august 2008 to James Kapalo (jk51@soas.ac.uk) and Stefania Travagnin (st8@soas.ac.uk).