

A Case Study in Biblical Interpretation: Knowledge, Knower and Knowing (Part 2)

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Introduction: The research context

Two key points are foundational to an appreciation of the nature, purpose and potential of the human sciences, of which the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) is a part. The first of these is that our 'knowledge' (if we can call it that at all) is constructed, not mined or uncovered. But what does it mean to say that knowledge in the human sciences is 'constructed'? A helpful contrast can be drawn with the natural sciences, which might be perceived to rely on certain indisputable constants (forces, elements, and so on). In the human sciences, however, there is no canon of universally accepted, objective and discoverable 'facts' upon which our inquiries can rest. In other words, we are making knowledge, not finding facts that already exist. Given that we cannot create the 'controlled conditions' that scientists might use in their research, we must acknowledge that the context in which a study takes place will have profound effects on the outcome or outcomes. Our knowledge, then, is at least partly made/constructed by the contexts from which it comes.

The second point is intimately connected to the first. It is that we, as inquirers, influence our findings because we are a part of the context. The lenses through which we see the world (for example, our religion, worldview or culture), the way we have been brought up and educated, the research methodologies and methods we choose to use, and the social, political and other convictions we hold dear (amongst other things), all have a bearing on what we come to 'know'. Knowledge, in that regard, cannot be divorced from either the process of knowing or the knower. Consequently, rigorous, responsible and ethically-sound research involves reflection on the ways in which our context – including our identities as researchers – influences our research and is reflected in our findings. This is part of engaging in reflective and reflexive inquiry: we ought to be attuned to our own positionalities (our stance in relation to what we are studying), contexts, methodologies and methods, and to focus attention on those factors, in order to enhance and inform our ongoing academic inquiries.

Implications for RE

If that is true for 'the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)' in an academic context (for a discussion of this phrase, see Freathy and John 2018, 7), then what are the implications for Religious Education (RE)? Rob and Giles Freathy argue that students of RE should experience an initiation into the communities of academic inquiry concerned with the study of religion(s) and worldview(s), for example through Theology, Religious Studies and cognate disciplines, so as to 'enter into the kind of informed, critical and sensitive dialogues' which are at the heart of such academic studies. They are suggesting that not only do students need to learn about religion(s) and worldview(s), but also to learn 'how to learn' about religion(s) and worldview(s) (2013: 163, 159, 161; see also CoRE 2018). That being the case, the existence of a multiplicity of interpretations, methodologies and methods within relevant communities of academic inquiry should be reflected in the RE classroom (something Freathy and Freathy have done through the 'RE-searchers approach' in primary schools [Freathy *et al.* 2015; Freathy 2016]: <http://www.reonline.org.uk/re-searchers>). Positionality, context, methodology and method should be important 'objects of study' for students in RE in schools, just as they are for researchers involved in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) in universities, as we have elsewhere advocated in relation to the 'Big Ideas for RE' project (Freathy and John 2018).

By way of illustration, in this article we focus on a cross-cultural research endeavour. This is a Biblical Studies project that generates encounters between British and Namibian cultures, Euro-American and African bodies of scholarship, ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ worldviews, and grassroots and scholarly forms of biblical interpretation. This case study is used to fulfil a number of functions. First, it highlights the significance of positionality (for example, religion or worldview) in determining one’s interpretation of ‘reality’. Second, it exemplifies one approach that can be creatively adapted (hopefully, alongside many more) for use in critical, dialogic and inquiry-led RE. Third, it indicates how empathy, criticality and reflexivity in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) can be enhanced through (a) personal encounter with different perspectives and contexts; (b) dialogue with those who experience them and live accordingly; and (c) first-hand experience of multi-methodological inquiry processes. Lastly, it stimulates consideration of how these encounters, dialogues and inquiries enable us to reflect more profoundly on our own positionalities, contexts and perspectives.

Grassroots Biblical Interpretation in Owambo, Namibia

Given the temporal and cultural distance between a contemporary UK context and the New Testament authors and audiences, it is understandable that certain passages sometimes seem mystifying. The worldviews they portray – for example, those incorporating miracles, exorcisms, and mastery over nature – may seem to be far removed from the perspective of the 21st Century industrialised West. And yet, it is scholars from the industrialised West, from Europe and America – predominantly white, middle-class, and male – who have traditionally dominated the field of Biblical Studies (see John 2019). We might ask why, however, they supposedly have a privileged understanding of what the texts mean today or might have meant to their earliest hearers.

Helen C. John’s doctoral study (John, *In Press*) focuses on Northern Namibia, and Christianity amongst the Owambo peoples. John examines the ways in which African Traditional Religion and local culture influence grassroots interpretations of New Testament texts in the Owambo region. During a year of fieldwork in a remote village, John observed ways of life in this cultural context, talked to community members about their diverse worldviews, beliefs and practices, and gathered interpretations of New Testament texts through convening women’s, men’s and children’s discussion groups.

Christianity had first been introduced to this region in 1870 with the arrival of Finnish missionaries. Today, almost the entire Owambo population is Christian. However, one would not expect pre-Christian beliefs and practices – those associated with what is often termed ‘African Traditional Religion’ (ATR) – to have been erased in such a short time (although, scholarly claims to that effect have been made about Owamboland: Aarni 1982, 9-10; Hiltunen 1986, 157, and 1993, 10; McKittrick 2001, 1). One of the aims of the project was, therefore, to assess the ways in which indigenous culture, or ATR, interacts with Christianity. This was done, in part, by interpreting New Testament texts with groups of volunteers and, thereafter, analysing the ways in which participants employed local culture as an interpretative lens in their readings of the texts. A second aim was to bring these grassroots New Testament interpretations, replete with original interpretative insights, into metaphorical dialogue with scholarly interpretations. Given the very different way of life and worldviews that the community members would likely hold (as set against the Western researcher’s [atheist] industrialised, scientific perspective), it was hoped that the grassroots community readings would provoke a stimulating ‘conversation’ and challenge, or nuance, professional scholarly readings.

As will be apparent from the above description, the study involves multiple disciplines. Whilst it is, at heart, a project rooted in Biblical Studies, it necessarily draws upon Social Anthropology, the Anthropology of Religion, Social History, and African Studies (as CoRE 2018 notes, ‘The study of religious and non-religious worldviews is not the preserve of any one particular discipline at university level’ [37]). The methodologies, methods and skills involved are equally diverse: the researcher needed to be versed in archival research, textual studies, languages (biblical languages and an Owambo vernacular), fieldwork theory and practice (including participant-observation, convening groups and conducting interviews), ethnography, as well as sub-fields of scholarship within Biblical Studies (historical-critical, contextual, African, and social-scientific, amongst others).

An example from the project

A brief example will illustrate the outcomes of the project, focusing on lived experiences of spirits in Owamboland and the biblical possession of Legion, the Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8:26-39; for a more detailed but accessible discussion of this example, see John 2017). In the Owambo context, experiences of spirits are not uncommon. Participants in John’s discussion groups reported instances of spirit-possession, as well as contact with both ancestral spirits and the restless spirits of recently deceased persons. Community members also communicate with spirits in weather phenomena (whirlwinds, for example) and avoid particular places in the landscape that are considered to be inhabited by dangerous spirit presences. John reports that when the Owambo community groups interpreted the narrative of Legion, the reality of spirit experiences in their lives came to the fore – the cultural context and the participants’ worldviews provided lenses for enhanced understanding of the biblical text. Participants understood Legion’s demeanour and behaviour, as well as his flight to the gravesite and wilderness, as indicators of the presence of evil or dirty spirits. Participants explained that both land and people could be in Owamboland – and seemed to be in the narrative – *literally* possessed.

The importance of recognising multiple interpretations

This generated an interesting dialogue with Western, historical-critical biblical scholarship, which has often characterised the spirits as symbolic, or as colonised communities ‘acting out’ their subjugation by Roman imperial forces (Myers 1988, 193-4; Horsley 2001, 145-7). With the Owambo interpretations clearly influenced by their cultural context, what could then be said of the Western academic interpretations? John suggests that the lived reality of spirits in other worldviews is minimised and marginalised by the *demythologised* worldview of privileged, Western, academic interpreters (a location of which she herself is a part). Because greater socio-political power rests with Western scholars, their interpretations become hegemonic – they come to dominate within academic circles. And yet, when confronted with alternative interpretations such as those from Owamboland, the highly contextual nature of the ‘Western worldview’ (‘symbolic’) interpretations is revealed.

As McDermott and Varenne remind us (1995, 325): ‘*Not only is our wisdom not total, there is yet much to be learned from others*’. John’s study illustrates the benefits of embracing interpretations from the margins, from worldviews and perspectives beyond our own. The Owambo interpretations – alternatives to mainstream Western interpretations – challenge us to think in new ways about the texts and reveal to us the extent to which Western interpretations are influenced (or even governed) by our Western context. Whilst this might seem obvious, our ‘Western-ness’ (and the particularities of Christianity in our context) is not always apparent until we are confronted with alternative ways of being/seeing/interpreting (and alternative expressions of Christianity). Of course, there is variety to be found in all contexts, because

there is no such thing as a fixed or singular ‘culture’, any more than there is a fixed or singular form of Christianity. Accordingly, there is variety amongst the textual interpretations John gathered in Owamboland, just as there is within Western professional circles. However, comparing/contrasting the trends that characterise the two bodies of interpretation is revealing. John therefore suggests that bringing the Owambo interpretations into the conversation highlights the (often unacknowledged) post-Enlightenment, ‘rationalist’ and scientific context of the Western professional interpreters.

It is key to acknowledge here the central role played by critical reflection on epistemology and methodology (that is, put simply, questions about the nature of knowledge and how we create knowledge). Integral to John’s methodology is examination of the connections between lived experience (see CoRE 2018, 30-31, 52, 76), context, worldview and interpretation. In other words, the symbiotic relationship between context, knower and knowledge is a key object of study. This can be related to those she interprets with, professional biblical scholars, or herself. John’s project also illustrates the diversity of disciplines, methodologies and methods employed within the study of religion(s) and worldview(s), as well as the foundational role played by inquiry-led, dialogical, active and reflexive learning. It is this multi-methodological, reflexive approach that we would wish to see reflected in RE.

Using the RE-searchers approach

Returning again to the ‘RE-searchers approach’ by way of example (see, for example, Freathy *et al.* 2015), we can see reflected in John’s project all of the RE-searcher character roles:

- a. See-the-story Suzie: researching and analysing the context, using a wide variety of literature, from biblical commentaries to ethnographies, anthropological theory to missionary reports, as well as learning an Owambo language.
- b. Debate-it-all Derek: engendering and engaging in dialogue between Owambo-grassroots and Western-academic interpretations of texts and the worldviews and realities generating such interpretations.
- c. Ask-it-all Ava: facilitating biblical interpretation groups, conducting formal interviews with church leaders, conducting informal interviews with community members throughout a year-long stay.
- d. Have-a-go Hugo: engaging in participant-observation fieldwork, focused on anthropological study and contextual biblical interpretation, participating in the church and community life of the village, attending school, living in a local family.

Conclusions

As noted above, not only do RE students need to learn about religion(s) and worldview(s), but also to learn ‘how to learn’ about religion(s) and worldview(s) (Freathy and Freathy 2013, 161). The sample findings above illustrate how important it is that we (and our students) reflect on the constructed nature of our own reality and the variations of reality that may be encountered across communities, lifetimes, and across the globe. The lived reality of ‘spirit beings’ in certain worldviews influences the biblical interpretations of texts about spirits resulting from such contexts, showing that context influences knowledge. In turn, this highlights reflexively (looking back to our own context) the tendency of post-Enlightenment, ‘rationalist’, Western interpreters to deem biblical discussion of spirits and possession as ‘symbolic’ rather than ‘literal’. John’s study is suggestive of the enmeshed nature of disciplines within the humanities, arts and social sciences, and the ways in which ‘border-crossing’ into the other – engaging in an encounter – can prove transformative to the ways in which we understand our own discipline, knowledge and/or positionality. By engaging in encounters

(whether with other people, other worldviews, or other disciplines), we become attuned to the need for particularity in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). This helps us to avoid homogenising and stereotyping diverse communities, and to avoid erasing individual agency.

John's study is notable for its considerable focus on the benefits of encounters, also highlighted recently by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE 2018, 13, 76). These encounters operate in many different directions: between academic disciplines, between methodologies, between cultures, between worldviews, and between individuals and academic understandings within those worldviews. Utilising the encounter here provides an example of confronting generalisations and interrogating oversimplifications; it favours what Hufford calls 'tolerance of ambiguity' (1995, 60). Cultures are not to be seen as 'organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes' (Clifford 1988, 273). Importantly, this holds true for religion(s) and worldview(s) too. This suggests that any 'Big Ideas' (i.e. theories and generalisations) that we might wish to teach about religion(s) and worldview(s) (see Wintersgill 2017) should come with a caveat: they are helpful and yet inherently problematic platforms upon which to build a curriculum. That is because they, too, are constructions, unavoidably imperfect and imprecise, and open to conflict and contestation. They should be interrogated as hypotheses by inviting inquiry from the community of investigators. Both teachers and students should act as co-researchers in questioning the 'Big Ideas'. As investigators, we should encourage ourselves and our students to reflect on our/their relationship – as knowers – to the knowledge that we, they and others construct. The inchoate 'Big Ideas for RE' and the principles underlying the incipient 'RE-searchers approach' offer the beginnings of a route via which we might do so. However, both elements are required if RE is to become 'more self-conscious and self-critical' (Freathy *et al.* 2017).

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