

section three  
FIELD RESEARCH  
IN RELIGION

6

Field Research:  
Philosophical and  
Methodological Issues

As a field researcher, your primary task is to *understand* what you are studying. You are not trying to discover the meaning of life, or to make friends, or to work through your own doubts and uncertainties about the truth of religious claims. Your job is to figure out what is happening and to communicate what you have discovered in a clear and interesting manner. The purpose of this chapter is to identify some assumptions and principles of research that specifically apply to doing field research.

ASSUMPTIONS OF FIELD RESEARCH

All field research involves three essential assumptions. First, there must be an object to be studied, something we term “reality” or “the way things are.” If we do not believe that there is something out there that is independent of us, then there is no point in beginning the examination. In this situation, the object of study is a religious organization or tradition, with a complex set of features (such as beliefs and rituals) that exist, and have existed, independently of any research that may have been conducted.

Second, we believe that it is possible to gather information about that reality. We refer to that information as *data*, a word meaning something that is “given.” The assumption is that the researcher, by careful investigation, can

find information that provides knowledge about the object. For example, by watching a worship service, you can gather data about how people pray, and that information answers questions that led you to conduct the research in the first place.

Third, the researcher assumes that what is being studied can be ordered, made sense of, organized. There would be no point in conducting research if we believed that we were studying something that was completely random and arbitrary. After all, what could we say about such a reality? The goal of understanding, of explaining, is reasonable only if we believe that the world we know can be understood and explained.

If we take these assumptions seriously, then good researchers will respect the reality that is studied, will work hard and systematically to gather data about it, and will seek to order that data in as helpful and as thorough a way as possible.

PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

To make sure that your research accomplishes its goals, you must raise several issues before beginning a project. These issues are fundamental, and they are questions that should “bother” you throughout your research. Although each issue raises highly complicated philosophical and scientific problems, we will merely present them briefly to sensitize you to their importance.

Validity

If our task is to understand something about the world, we must be concerned about trying to assure that we are in fact reflecting that world rather than something else. We speak about the “validity” of research in the same way we would talk about the validity of a driver’s license. Your license is valid if it is authentic, up to date, and stamped by the appropriate authorities. Similarly, a result (often called a finding) of a research project is valid if it authentically expresses something about the current nature of the object under study. Asking about validity reminds us to worry about whether our research is really picking up on what is “out there,” rather than spinning off imaginary results. Most of our suggestions throughout this section are designed to help you produce a piece of valid research.

The most likely source of invalid results stems from our inability to draw appropriate conclusions from what we have found. A result might be invalid if it claims to have proven much more than can be reasonably inferred from the research itself. For example, if you have attended two services at a Buddhist temple, you are unlikely to be able to make general statements about what Buddhists believe or how Buddhists pray, without making it very clear that your conclusions are limited to a very small number of observations. We want



our conclusions as well as our methods to be trustworthy and solid, accurately reflecting the world as it is.

### Reliability

A second question often asked of research projects is whether they are reliable. The term *reliability* means the same as it does in our everyday life. What would it mean to call a friend "reliable"? It would mean that you could count on him, that he would be there tomorrow just as he is today. A reliable research finding is one that can also be counted on not to change from day to day.

Even though you are conducting a single study in one organization, you should be concerned about reliability as well. One way to do so is to ask yourself: "Could someone else, coming into this same organization, discover what I have discovered?" If your answer is no, then you need to rethink whether you can count on your data. For example, if you are gathering your information in a way that leads people to give you purely arbitrary answers to questions, then you (or anyone else) might get the opposite answer from those people tomorrow. The best way to guard against problems of reliability is to be systematic and careful in conducting your research.

Research is reliable only if the researcher provides sufficient information about how the information was gathered to enable anyone else to repeat the research and draw similar conclusions. Of course, if you are attending a service, no one else will ever have the opportunity to attend that same service in the future. But you can explain your procedures and analysis carefully enough to convince someone else that, had they been there, they would have drawn the same conclusions, and therefore your research and conclusions will be seen as reliable.

Note that both validity and reliability are based upon honesty and trust in both the content and the methods of the research. The key difference (and the reason why both are so necessary) is that validity involves the ability to accurately describe the object of study, while reliability concerns the extent to which our methods could lead someone else to the same conclusions. We judge research findings by both standards, in order to make sure that our attention is focused both on the accuracy of our results and the care with which we have proceeded in our data gathering.

### Objectivity

Related to both validity and reliability issues is another problem of conducting research: namely, the difficulty of being objective. Since the assumption is that there is an independent reality to be discovered, any biases or feelings of the researcher might prevent us from seeing "the world as it really is." If the goal is to understand and explain something (such as the ritual life of a congregation), our own prejudices are likely to hinder us from providing a completely accurate account.

Debates about the objectivity of research are complicated. But the basic insight you should have in beginning your research is to recognize that, while maintaining objectivity is extremely important and valuable, complete objectivity is impossible, and perhaps not even desirable. Part of the problem is that the very notion of "being objective" means many different things, only some of which are essential for a researcher.

For the sake of clarifying the point, think for a moment about the following situation. You and several classmates are sitting around a table, in the middle of which is a large cube. The cube has different colors on each side, and only one side is visible to each of you. Your task is to describe the cube. Can you do so objectively?

Using this example, we see that there are certain important ways in which you can (and should) be objective. You should be willing to report what color the cube looks like from your vantage point, and to do so regardless of what your own favorite color is (or whether you made a bet with someone else before you sat down that you would see a blue cube on the table). You should also be open to the way the cube looks to other people; if a fellow student sees a different color, this is more "data" that you need to think about before insisting on your own answer. And you need to look carefully and systematically at the cube, rather than just glancing at it out of the corner of your eye.

We have just identified three fundamental standards of objective research in this discussion: honesty, open-mindedness, and systematic examination. A good researcher is honest about what is seen and strives to avoid being blinded by biases, prejudices, or wishes. A good researcher is open-minded, willing to consider alternative explanations and take other people's research into account. And a good researcher is systematic, using whatever tools are available in a thorough manner to do the best possible job of understanding what is being studied. These are ways in which we can and must be objective.

#### AN OBJECTIVE RESEARCHER IS

Honest  
Open-minded  
Systematic

However, there are some ways in which we are going to be limited by the fact that *we* are conducting the research. Much of this limitation simply comes with the territory of being human—namely, we are finite creatures. I am able to sit in only one chair at a time. I can use only the senses I have, and some of them might not be perfectly functioning (for example, if I am color-blind, I will not report seeing the cube "accurately"). I may have had bad



experiences with similar experiments before and find it difficult to participate in such studies.

The point is a rather simple one: We always observe and learn selectively, through the subjective lenses we have as finite and imperfect creatures. But that fact does not mean we can give up on seeking to be objective. In addition to following the three standards suggested above (honesty, open-mindedness, and systematic exploration), we can try to apply these standards to the very problem of our subjectivity. We can be honest about what our biases are, and in so doing try to make sure that they color our research to the smallest possible extent. We can be willing to hear other people's perspectives and use them to question our own perspective and limitations. And we can seek to view things from different angles, not in the hope of eliminating our own point of view, but as a means of checking our all-too-human tendency to equate *our* view with *the* view.

In short, we urge you to be as self-aware as possible about the situations in which you find it hard, or impossible, to be objective. If you are turned off or disgusted by something that happens during your research, don't feel guilty about the feeling. Instead, admit it, think about it, and *use* it as a piece of data in your research. If you cannot appreciate someone's statement of belief because it conflicts with your own, recognize this fact, and try to figure out where the disagreement lies and why it is so important to you.

If you remind yourself periodically about the difficulties of conducting research that is valid, reliable, and objective, you will become a more self-aware and conscientious researcher, and the process and results of your work will reflect those values.

## SOME GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The somewhat abstract points we have made so far have major implications for how you proceed as you begin your empirical research. In studying a religious organization, you will be functioning primarily as a "participant observer," a fancy phrase that simply means that, while you are taking part in some activities of the group you are studying, you are there to observe and understand what is happening. In this section, we will suggest some broad "rules" to follow in adopting that role. Pay close attention to these basic guidelines, because they determine everything you will do in your research.

### 1. You Are a Participant and an Observer, but Not a Member.

This is a crucial distinction to bear in mind throughout your research project. Indeed, it is so important that the very choice of your research subject is dependent upon it. *Do not study a group to which you already belong, nor should you join the group in order to conduct your research.* Members identify themselves as belonging to organizations; they may pay dues, attend meet-

ings regularly, help determine policy, or just be willing to answer a question by saying, "I am a member of X." A member has an investment in the group.

As a researcher, you do not belong to the group you are studying. You may indeed participate in some of its activities, such as attending religious services or group meetings; but you are doing so *only* to understand how the group functions and what it would feel like to be a member. The researcher remains an "outsider" even when taking part in group activities.

### 2. Observe and Ask Questions as an Outsider, Not as an Insider.

Because you are not a member, you have a unique ability to adopt a different perspective. This is why it is so important to remain an outsider. You do not have any personal stake in whether the group survives or crumbles, gains or loses members, is correct or incorrect in its doctrine or practice. As a result, you are able to stand back and try to see the way the group functions, without being influenced by the needs or interests of its members.

This is not an easy task. Indeed, it may be the hardest part of conducting social research. You will have to train yourself to be objective, to ask questions from a more neutral standpoint, to avoid becoming influenced by the way the situation may look to the members themselves. All researchers have this difficulty; it is something that must be learned and relearned every time you begin a project, and something to keep reminding yourself of throughout the project.

### 3. Understanding Depends upon Imagination.

This is a difficult concept to grasp, but it is fundamental to the stance of the social researcher. Although you must strive to maintain your role as an outsider, you cannot simply pretend that you are a robot or an automaton processing information. You are being asked to study a group composed of human beings, and you need to understand what the *experience* of membership is for these people.

The term *understand* itself suggests the importance of this requirement. You need to imagine yourself in the place of the members, and ask yourself questions such as, "What does this feel like to them? What needs of theirs are being met? Why would they keep coming back to these meetings?"

There is a fine balance here between becoming so "understanding" that you forget that you are an outsider, and standing so far apart that you cannot gain any feel for the group or its members. Again, that is something you will have to struggle with as you conduct your research. Remember that it is a problem that all researchers face, so don't become discouraged at the difficulty of the task.

### 4. Your Identity as a Researcher Should Be Open.

You do not need to wear a sign announcing that you are attending a service only because you are enrolled in a course, nor do you need to tell



everyone you meet that you are “merely a researcher.” But you should respect the group’s right to know who you are, why you are there, and how you are going to use what they tell you. The rules are simple rules of both etiquette and ethics, and common sense and honesty should serve you well.

For example, you should identify yourself as a student doing research whenever you approach anyone for an interview, or when you first call and ask about attending services or meetings. In addition, if anyone asks you who you are or what you are doing there, tell them briefly about the project and why you are studying their group. (A simple “I have been interested in this [religious group] for a while, and wanted to learn more about it” will suffice.) When in doubt, answer briefly and honestly.

However, you do not have to feel that you are being made the object of someone else’s research or questioning. If people ask you questions about your own religious beliefs, memberships, or feelings, try to deflect the questions by reminding them that you are there to study *their* group. If you wish, you might want to offer to discuss your own views with them at a later time.

### 5. Observe, Observe, Observe.

As a researcher, you have several tools that you have carried around with you all your life: your mind and your senses. You have always used them, but now you will have to be more aware of disciplining them.

The key to productive research is to be sensitive with all aspects of one’s being: Keep your eyes open, listen carefully, and think slowly and carefully about what is being said. Pay attention not only to what is happening externally, but what is happening inside you as well. For example, are you feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, uneasy, aroused, moved, bored?

Once again, you will find that it is not an easy task to observe in this manner. You will have to learn when to pay more attention to external events and when to focus on your own reactions, when to attend to seeing, and when to listen. You will learn to become more sensitive, and to be able to listen and look more effectively, the more often you observe.

This is why you should try to do as many different observational activities as possible. Try to attend several religious services, instead of just one or two; if possible, go to some other meetings of the group’s committees or activities. Talk not just to the main clergyperson, but to some other staff and members. Try to go to the group’s sanctuary when it is empty, and show up early enough to see people arriving. The more situations you can place yourself in, the richer your observations will be, and the more practiced an observer you will become.

### 6. Remember That, as a Participant Observer, You Have a Right to Be There.

Religious institutions in the United States are almost always extremely open to people attending their services. Most groups welcome newcomers,

and people will usually be interested in your research and your interest in them. Don’t feel embarrassed or dishonest about being there, and don’t feel (or act!) like a spy.

It is perfectly natural to be nervous and anxious about conducting field research. After all, you are walking into a strange situation, where unexpected things can happen. If you avoid beginning your research because of these fears, talk about them with a friend or with your instructor. Remember, however, that everyone is somewhat uncomfortable with new situations and strangers, but that the process becomes much easier as you continue.

You may stumble across a group that prefers not to have outsiders present. You can minimize the chance of embarrassment by making a phone call to the group before you plan to attend your first meeting. If, by some chance, you are asked to leave by an usher or other group official, do so. If possible, however, ask them why you are being excluded, and whether you can come back at another time to speak to someone in the group about their activities and beliefs. If they decline, choose another group for your research.

Such occurrences are extremely unlikely. Indeed, it is far more probable that you will be besieged with questions and offers to stay for coffee or to participate in other activities. Within the boundaries set by our earlier guidelines, take full advantage of the opportunities for more detailed observation provided by such offers.

As you begin planning and conducting your research, continue to think about the various issues we have raised in this chapter. How can you ensure that your research is valid and reliable? How can you maintain sufficient objectivity without sacrificing understanding? What methods are most useful in maintaining your status as a participant observer?

## 7

# Elements of Participant Observation: An Overview

Within the guidelines discussed in earlier chapters, how should you conduct your field research? In this chapter, we will provide an overview, including some hints about developing themes and questions, choosing the group, entering the setting, observing, and describing and analyzing the research group.

In later chapters, we will return in more detail to issues related to asking questions, interviewing, and analyzing your data. We strongly recommend, therefore, that you read through the entire book before beginning your field work. But this chapter will provide you with a good indication of how to proceed.

You should read (or reread) the sections of this book dealing with assumptions related to participant observation (Chapter 6) and selecting a topic (Chapter 3). All of the points made in those sections are relevant for your empirical research and should be done *before* you begin your observations. However, you might want to attend a service or two to help define your subject.

## CHOOSING THE RESEARCH GROUP

Your instructor may provide you with some guidance concerning the group or groups to be studied. Follow those instructions carefully. You can find information about different groups in local newspapers (which list religious services, times, and places), the telephone book, or by a walking or

driving tour of the area. In addition to your instructor's guidance, there are three major criteria for choosing a group:

1. Do not choose a group to which you already belong. The only exception that might be made is if your particular religious tradition forbids you from attending any other religion's services. If this is the case, discuss the matter with your instructor before deciding to study your own religious group.
2. Choose a group you are interested in learning about. The basis for this interest could be that you once attended a service with a friend, or that one of your present friends is a member, or that you read something about the group that intrigued you, or some other reason. The reason is less important than that you have one. The research will be much more challenging and enjoyable if you study something you want to learn about.
3. Choose a group that is accessible to you and has enough activities and meetings for you to study in the time available to you. If your first choice is a group that is so far away that you will be able to attend only two meetings or conduct two interviews, you are better off studying a second or third choice that is closer and more convenient. If the group has its religious services at a time you cannot attend, find another one to study. You may need to make a series of phone calls to determine which group is most appropriate for you.

## ENTERING THE RESEARCH SETTING

Once you have tentatively chosen the group, decide upon a strategy for beginning the research. In most cases, this will involve three related steps:

1. determining the time and place of religious services,
2. attending at least one such service, and
3. speaking with someone in the group about getting more information.

It is easy to find out where and when services are held. Most newspapers will list this information (see the "Religion" section of the Saturday edition of your local newspaper), and telephone books routinely list the groups as well (check in the Yellow Pages under "Religious Organizations"). We recommend that you make a telephone call during the week before you are planning on attending the service. Simply inform the person who answers the phone that you are a student who would like to attend a service, and ask where and when the services are held. Making this call can save you time and might also provide you with some information about the religious group. (*Your research begins as soon as you dial the phone.* Make some brief notes to yourself about the conversation with the switchboard operator, even if that is all the contact you have had so far.)



Many religious organizations have more than one service on their day of worship. If possible, try to attend the largest or "main" service of the day. If in doubt, ask the person on the phone which service has the greatest attendance. In most Christian churches, there is a service around 11 o'clock that is usually the main service. In Jewish services, either Friday night or Saturday morning is the main service (as a general rule, Reform stresses Friday night, and Conservative and Orthodox Saturday morning, although this is not always the case). In Islam, the main service is held on Friday. Other religions may hold services at different times, so a phone call is the best way to find out.

Once you decide which service to attend, carefully prepare yourself for your first major observation. The following preobservation steps are highly recommended.

### THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOUR FIRST VISIT

- I. Write down some themes you are interested in exploring for your paper. (Read Chapter 3 for suggestions.)
- II. Make a list of key points to observe in the service, and how you intend to focus on them. (Example: "Look for use of music in the service and how it seems to affect people. Attend to the expressions on people's faces, body movements, and so on.")
- III. If available, read some brief background information on the religious organization of which your particular group is a part. (Refer to the information in Appendix 1, as well as any relevant readings in your other course texts.)
- IV. Make a list of your expectations, fears, and concerns about attending the service. This provides you with an excellent opportunity to recognize any preconceptions or biases you may be bringing with you into the research. In making your list, try to answer the following questions:
  1. What impressions do you have about the religious tradition itself? Have you heard negative things about it or its members? Do you have any stereotypes about people who are members of this religion?
  2. What do you think the service will be like? What type of people do you think you will find there? How do you think they will act? What sort of atmosphere do you expect?
  3. How do you think you will be treated? Do you expect to feel welcomed or ignored? Are you afraid of being embarrassed and singled out? Are you nervous about not knowing anyone and about not knowing how to act?

4. Where do you think your preconceptions come from? Can you trace them to any earlier experiences, to reading, or to any other source?

V. Consider asking someone else to attend the first service with you. This person might be a member of the group, but preferably should not be. Discuss with that person what you will be looking for.

On the day of the service, be sure to dress appropriately. You might want to ask about attire when you make your phone call to the religious group. In most cases, however, just dress neatly and modestly (no jeans, shorts, or loud colors). Don't feel that you have to get extremely dressed up, however; it is important that you feel comfortable with what you wear.

Certain religious traditions may place more stringent requirements on worshippers. For example, Muslims expect women to avoid exposing any part of the body (including the hair) at worship services; in addition, people with any bleeding (including women who are menstruating) are not allowed to attend Islamic services, and certain washings may be required before entering. Again, a phone call is the best way to avoid embarrassment or being prevented from attending.

Leave enough time to arrive at the service at least fifteen minutes before it is scheduled to begin. When you arrive, spend a few minutes outside the building looking at the neighborhood, the type of building, and any interesting architectural features (including religious symbols on the outside).

When you go in, follow the instructions (if any) provided by the ushers. If there is no such guidance, find a seat in a part of the room that allows you maximum observation range. You will probably be most comfortable sitting toward the back, which also allows you to follow cues from the members as the service proceeds.

Sit quietly and attentively, watching and listening as people enter.

### SITTING THROUGH A SERVICE

Religious services vary enormously. The key to observing a service is to get a feel for the flow of what is happening, and to observe as carefully as possible how people are responding at each stage of the service. If a program is provided, quickly read through it before the service begins, but most of your attention should be directed toward the building and the people who are coming in.

During the service, follow the basic cues provided by other people in the congregation. Unless you feel uncomfortable doing so, participate in the service: Stand when the congregation stands, sing the songs, read



responses along with the members. If you prefer, you can sit or stand silently at such moments.

There are certain parts of the service in which it may be inappropriate for you to participate, and some of this might have to be learned by trial and error. For example, in most Christian services, only baptized Christians are expected to participate in the Eucharist (the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine); in Roman Catholic services, only baptized Roman Catholics should take part in communion. If you are not baptized, just sit silently during this part of the service, observing what people are doing and how they seem to be affected by the experience. If you are baptized, you may choose to take part in the Eucharist, but you might also decide to sit back and observe.

In other cases, there may be activities in which you are unable or unwilling to participate. For example, a Muslim service might have prayer techniques that are athletically too demanding, and Buddhist or Hindu temples might require you to sit in an uncomfortable position for a long period of time. If you are physically unable to participate, or if your own religious views prevent you from doing some of these activities, just sit or stand quietly and observe for a while. Otherwise, we suggest that you try to participate, at least long enough to get a sense of what the activity might feel like.

Chapter 8 outlines some specific elements of the service to look for. In general, try to be as open as you can to what is going on. Look and listen not just for what is on your list, but for unexpected events and feelings. Look around at various parts of the congregation occasionally, rather than always focusing your attention on the front of the room. In periods of group silence, attend to what people are doing.

If possible, jot down some brief notes during the service, to jog your memory later on. You might use the program provided, or a small piece of paper in your pocket. Do not try to take extensive notes, however, since that will just distract you (and those around you). In some situations, writing during the service is not allowed (such as in Orthodox or many Conservative Jewish services, and in Muslim services); if you are in doubt, you might ask the usher when you first arrive about their policy. If someone asks you to stop writing during the service, just put the paper away and try to take mental notes.

If you are at a service that consists primarily of silent meditation (such as a Friends meeting or a Buddhist service), you will not be able to take notes. At such a service, there are two important kinds of observation that you should perform, however. First, observe how the other people are behaving. Are they sitting? Are their eyes closed? Do they seem to be praying to themselves? Is the silence ever interrupted by any activity or sounds?

In addition, part of your task at such a service should be to try to experience the silence yourself. If you can read something beforehand about the religion's understanding of the meaning of silence or medita-

tion, do so. In most cases, the key is to clear one's mind of extraneous thoughts, and try to allow the silence to place one in closer contact to the sacred (however that might be expressed by the particular religious tradition). You should try this as well. If you have never sat silently and meditated, this will be a strange and difficult experience, but it is an important part of your observation and will give you some useful information about the practice.

When the service ends, sit and watch people as they leave, continuing your observation.

## AFTER THE SERVICE

Try to allow enough time after the service to speak with some members of the group. You might attend the informal gathering that often occurs immediately following the service. If no one comes up to you and asks you who you are, find someone who is alone and introduce yourself, saying you would like to talk to them about the group. We know it is hard to just walk up to a stranger in such a situation, but almost everyone will be very responsive and willing to talk. If they are not, just continue to watch and observe what is happening.

If the person who led the service is present, try to talk to her or him after the service. Introduce yourself, and ask whether you can make an appointment to ask some further questions. (See Chapter 9 on interviewing.) If there are other people who seem interested, ask them about setting up a time to talk further as well. Use your first time in the setting as an opportunity to build some contacts and opportunities for your research.

Finally, before leaving, try to get some written literature about the religious organization. Ask an usher or another member whether they have any brochures or informational material giving historical or descriptive data about the group. If they have a library, ask when it is open and whether you could come back to look through their materials.

## DESCRIBING YOUR OBSERVATIONS

As soon as you leave the building, this round of observation ends, but your work does not. As soon as possible (preferably immediately), take out a piece of paper and jot down as many notes as you can about what you observed. Include everything you can remember, however insignificant it might appear to be: number of people present, type and color of clothing, sounds and smells, impressions and feelings (again, refer to Chapter 8 for some suggestions). Just write down enough to jog your memory later when you can write more detailed notes.



Within the next few hours, sit down in a quiet place and, using the brief notes you have already written, write out an extended description of your observation. Begin by indicating the date, place, and time of the observation, the nature of the observation (religious service, meeting, etc.), whether you were alone, and when you are writing the description. Include as much detail as possible in your elaborated notes.

Try to distinguish between things you saw or feelings you had at the time of the service, and your current feelings and thoughts in looking back on it now. (You might want to put the latter comments in brackets, or use a different color of ink or type to set them off.) *Be thorough.* After the first twenty-four hours, you can count on remembering very little of what you observed. (Appendix 3 provides some examples of what your field notes should look like.)

In addition, read over the notes you wrote before the service about your expectations and fears. Write down (in a "before-after" format) what the experience was actually like. For example:

1. Were your expectations met? Was the experience easier or more difficult than you had imagined?
2. Did anything surprise you? Did anything happen that you had never seen (or even heard of) before?
3. How did the service compare to other religious services you have attended? What were the major similarities and differences?

Chapter 10 ("Analyzing the Data") provides more detailed suggestions on how to organize and use your notes.

## THE RANGE OF OBSERVATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

We have discussed your entry into the setting in terms of a religious service. But there are numerous other types of observations you might make, depending upon the nature and scope of the research project. We recommend attending a service first, in order to orient yourself to the central ritual of the group. In some cases, you might have to conduct an interview or attend a meeting before going to a service, however.

Try to set up as many different types of observations as possible, and organize them in a coherent fashion. We believe the following is an optimal (although not the only acceptable) order for conducting your field research.

### AN IDEAL SCHEDULE FOR YOUR RESEARCH

1. Make a telephone contact with the group
2. Read some material about the group
3. Attend a service
4. Read some more material about the group (including literature they might give to you)
5. Attend another service
6. Interview clergyperson or group leader
7. Interview a staff person or member
8. Attend another group function (or two or three!)
9. Interview other members
10. Attend additional services or meetings

[Note: Not included in this outline are the various steps related to note-taking, transcribing interviews, outlining your paper, etc.]

Although there is nothing sacred about this schedule, it will allow you to approach each event with sufficient background and openness to get the most out of each experience. For example, if you interview the group leader before you have attended a service or two, you are less likely to know the key questions you need to ask that person about the group's theology or symbols. Similarly, if you interview group members before you have attended some other function, you will not be able to ask them about their own participation and views of the different activities.

How much you do depends on both the nature of your topic and the expectations your instructor has created for the project. What is more important is that you think carefully about the order and structure of your various observations, in order that they provide you with as much new knowledge as possible. As you move from observation to observation, think about whether there are other people you need to talk to, or other events you need to attend. For instance, you might find that you want to attend a service at a different time (or on a different day), to determine whether the people attending that service have different experiences or characteristics.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Behind these guidelines and suggestions stands the central insight with which we began: Your task is to understand what the religious group is like.



Your stance in doing so is as a participant observer, requiring you to enter the world you are studying and to imaginatively recreate for yourself the experience of the members, but to do so always as an outsider. Your tools are your senses and your mind, and your skills as an observer are measured by your ability to attend not only to what you see, hear, feel, and experience in the religious setting but also to attend to your own inner states and reactions to the situation.

## 8

# What to Look For

You are sitting in a religious service, watching people you don't know repeating odd phrases and performing strange rituals. Or you speak with a friend about her religious beliefs and find that the language she uses is filled with unusual concepts and unintelligible phrases. Or you are talking with a group of classmates, and you suddenly discover that you are the only person in the group who was brought up with different religious values and principles. You may find yourself confused in such situations, wondering what is happening, why it seems so strange to you, and how it could make so much sense to those who are taking part.

In this chapter, we will suggest what to look at in your quest to understand the religious group you are examining. You will not be able to examine all (or even most) of these factors in your project, simply because of time and energy limitations. What you choose to focus on should be determined both by your own interests and by the nature of the particular organization you have chosen.

For the purposes of simplifying the discussion, we will divide religious experience into three categories.<sup>1</sup> Although religion is a highly complex phe-

<sup>1</sup>These categories are based on the work of sociologist Joachim Wach, particularly in his book *Sociology of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1944).