Religious positionalities and political science research in 'the field' and beyond

Rumsby, Seb; Eggert, Jennifer Philippa

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Standard Article

Religious positionalities and political science research in 'the field' and beyond: Insights from Vietnam, Lebanon and the UK

Seb Rumsby [ID]
School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Jennifer Philippa Eggert
Centre for Religion and Public Life, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Abstract
This article contributes to the growing literature on researcher reflexivity by broaching the often-ignored issue of religious positionalities within political science, as well as speaking to the methodological implications of researching religion more broadly. We present and compare two autoethnographic case studies of research on politico-religious conflict in Vietnam and Lebanon, exploring how a researcher's religiosity presents unique fieldwork challenges, opportunities and insights. We then discuss the ambivalence faced by religious researchers within the highly secularised academic environment, thus blurring the artificial dichotomy between 'the field' and the academy. Our reflections centre around three findings: (1) the importance of taking an intersectional approach which neither essentialises nor ignores religious aspects of positionality, whilst also being sensitive to spatial and temporal shifts in how they interact with a researcher's gender, ethnicity, class and other identifiers; (2) the opportunities and perils of a researcher's apparent religious common ground with participants (or lack thereof) in building rapport and negotiating a degree of insider status; and (3) the similarities and differences between suspicions of religious partialism during fieldwork and within academia.

Corresponding author:
Jennifer Philippa Eggert, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Religion and Public Life, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.
Email: jennifer@jliflc.com

Introduction

It's not every day that academics get accused of being a member of ISIS, or a covert missionary. Yet this has happened to both authors of this article, during our experiences of researching politically sensitive issues involving religious(ly framed) conflict – as researchers with religious identities. In this article, we seek to discuss an under-reported issue within social sciences, and especially political studies: how does a researcher's religious positionality (or lack thereof) bear upon the dynamics of fieldwork access, relationships with research participants and interpretation of data concerning religious politics. This is in response to the call for researchers to share and record experiences of uncomfortable or sensitive issues, in order to inform better research practice (Bashir 2018). What's more, we address the elephant in the room of the ambivalent religious scholar amidst a highly secularised academic environment. In contrast to problematic academic assumptions of an 'objective' methodological atheism, we argue that reflexive religious researchers can uncover unique insights about the nature of religious tensions and contestation. By focusing on our experiences both in 'the field' and academia more broadly, we contribute to debates challenging conceptions of 'the field' as being essentially different from society more broadly (Amit 1999; Söderström 2011).

After a concise literature review which tracks the roots of 'academic theophobia' across the social sciences to the Enlightenment bifurcation of science and religion, the bulk of the article is devoted to two autoethnographic cases studies. Seb's research into the everyday politics of Christianisation among a marginalised ethnic minority group in Vietnam encountered methodological and ethical challenges when trying to build rapport with people from both sides of an antagonistic religious divide. Attempts to gain an insider status among Christians risked alienating him from non-Christians and vice versa, while his own Christian identity led to opportunities and tensions among both groups – particularly surrounding the method of 'participant intoxication' (Fiskesjö 2010). Next, Jennifer's research on the role of female militants and fighters in Lebanon's civil war brought her into contact with people from different faith traditions as well as secular groups. As a Muslim researcher, the difficulties she faced with in the field overlapped with similar experiences out of the field: questions over whether religious researchers belong in academia and how neutral they can be, as well being othered and exoticised.

Within the contrasting case studies are a number of common themes which are elaborated upon in the concluding discussion: the importance of an intersectional approach to religious/non-religious identities, the evolution of different aspects of positionality over time and space, the tensions of walking the 'methodological tightrope' between insider and outsider status, and the reproduction of suspicions about religion both during fieldwork and within academia. Along the way, we show how the very challenges and tensions associated with religious positionalities can be very productive in generating unique insights which might otherwise not have been uncovered. Accordingly, this article is not only relevant to other researchers with a religious identity but is of broader relevance for non-religious researchers to help them understand what they might inadvertently be missing from their own positionalities. This does not mean one positionality is inherently

better or worse than another; rather, each perspective may be useful and, when combined and triangulated, contribute to a more holistic understanding of politics.

Literature review

Examining positionality means recognising that 'all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins' (Valentine 2002: 116). Scholars are not able to see 'everything from nowhere' (Haraway 1998: 581), despite the tendency of much academic writing to hide the author from texts in the attempt to appear more authoritative. In contrast, 'reflexivity is to dig deep into who/ what we are. Reflexivity is a process that brings the researcher's self to the central stage and makes her/him visible' (Miled 2019: 5). Soedirgo and Glas (2020) define active reflexivity as the interrogation of (1) the researcher's positionality; (2) how this positionality is read by research participants, given their own social location and the contexts in which they interact; and (3) the assumptions about our conclusions in the first two stages. This should be an active and ongoing process during research, given that positionalities are not static and, over time, different elements of a researcher's positionality can emerge as more significant and influential than others (De Koning et al., 2012).

While increasing attention to various aspects of positionality has been paid by social scientists since the 1980s along with the growing popularity of subjectivist epistemologies, religious reflexivity has lagged behind somewhat. Sociology and anthropology have long been interested in religion, but both disciplines have also been influenced by problematic assumptions about the great 'other' of 'scientific' knowledge. For example, despite sociological founding fathers Weber and Durkheim attaching great importance to religion, the former described himself as 'religiously unmusical' (Henkel 2011), and his seminal (and now increasingly inaccurate) secularisation thesis convinced generations of sociologists that religion would become redundant as a topic of study. As Stump put it, 'to the extent that [Western] academics have believed that religion has little bearings on their own lives, they may also have become less likely to study it' (Stump 2008: 369) – and its impact on their positionality as researchers. Meanwhile, influential earlier anthropologists have been criticised as being unable to take religion seriously by treating it as 'superstition to be explained... not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in' (Evans-Pritchard 1964). Moreover, anthropological researchers have often been seen as entangled in an antagonistic relationship with missionaries who are framed as their polar opposites – 'conservers v. converters, doubters v. knowers, and listeners v. preachers' (Van der Geest 1990: 588). This is ironic since in fact they share many similarities, both methodological (immersion into target community, learning of local languages) and historical (being embedded in colonial power relations).

The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed the 'return of religion' (or increasing acknowledgement of its enduring role) in public discourse and world politics. Concurrently, human geographers have led the way in taking religious positionalities more seriously (Kong 2001), although cases of religious reflexivity can be found in other disciplines. They identify an 'academic theophobia' (Ferber 2006) which is rooted back in the (Western) Enlightenment bifurcation of science and religion, and embedded positivist

beliefs of objectivity and rationality into the social sciences. This theophobia is manifested in the suspicion that researchers with a religious identity might be unable to research religions impartially: 'the identity of the religious geographer may often be stigmatized or considered taboo in most "politically correct" and yet rigorously secular academic environments' (Yorgason and Dora 2009). Yet this Eurocentric Enlightenment hangover is rebutted by postsecular theory, which asserts that religion and secularity are interdependent and entangled (Beaumont et al., 2018). According to Sack, 'the arrogance of reason in modernity stems from the belief that the partial offers little or nothing of value – that we could eventually be virtually impartial and still human. This is wrong. We will always be partially situated and in the world' (Sack 1997: 6).

In contrast, Henkel asserts that being a believer can in fact be beneficial for research on religion, 'just as it is an advantage or even a necessity for a musicologist to be able to read and practise music' (Henkel 2011: 389). While most would agree that explicit creeds, beliefs and value judgments should be avoided as starting points for research, the religious researcher is familiar with specialist language, terminology and ways of thinking that can be difficult for outsiders to understand, as well as often having easier access to research participants and sources as an insider (Megoran 2004: 45). This is of course complexified by the fact that religion is not a homogenous, fixed category but encompasses a huge diversity of faith traditions, meanings, beliefs and practices, so there is a need to avoid essentialising 'religious' or 'non-religious' categories for both researchers and research subjects (Williams 2017). Based on these points, reflexive human geographers of religion have been promoting open and honest dialogue about the possibilities, challenges and contradictions of conducting research both within their own religious communities and across faith boundaries (c.f. Bailey et al., 2009; Kapinga et al., 2020; Denning et al., 2022). Nevertheless, almost all of this literature is based on research conducted in the Global North, and there is a need to consider the dynamics of intersectional religious positionalities elsewhere – something this article does with its case studies in Vietnam and Lebanon.

While some progress has been made in debates on religious positionalities in other social sciences disciplines, the same cannot be said of political science which, alongside economics, is among the most secular of all social sciences in its outlook (Singh et al., 2007). Debates on religious positionalities remain underdeveloped within political sciences, despite the increased attention paid to religious politics since the turn of the 21st century following 9/11. For example, when discussing the ethics of political science research in the Middle East and Northern Africa, Mednicoff affirms a positivist position that 'social science work that touches on religion can be done without bias or the need to acknowledge the researcher's connection to the object or subjects of study' (Mednicoff 2015). Another rare example of explicit reference to religious positionality, albeit from a different perspective, can be found in Cammett's (2013) proposal of using 'proxy interviewing' during sensitive research. In the context of having multiple research assistants, she advocates 'matching' interviewers with interviewees based on their shared religion (or lack of religion). While Cammett at least acknowledges the salience of religion in her instrumental attempts to build rapport with interviewees, Soedirgo and Glas note that she does not 'actively unpack assumptions about how intersectional identities make interactions contingent and context specific' (2020: 528). Instead, they call for an

active reflexivity approach which questions our (perhaps primordialist) assumptions about the pre-eminence of certain positionalities above others.

This is a good start, and clearly political scientists have a lot to learn from other disciplines. It could be argued that, if anything, political scientists should be even *more* reflexive since they generally focus more on religious conflict, tensions and contestations – as in the two case studies presented below – during which religious positionalities tend to become sharper and often take on a life of their own. Instead, there is a dearth of such methodological considerations within political science publications and politics departments in general.[1] On the contrary, in our experience, there remains an ambivalence within politics departments similar to Aston et al.'s observation of 'an underlying anxiety that those who study religious groups may be covert religious activists unless they explicitly declare their allegiances' (Aston et al., 2015: 7). One contribution of this article, then is to open up debates about the possibilities and tensions of religious positionalities surrounding politically sensitive or contentious research, both on the 'field' and within academia.

Autoethnographic case studies

We approach these questions from an autoethnographic perspective (Ellis et al., 2011; Douglas and Carless 2013), reflecting on our own experiences with religious positionalities as political science researchers in 'the field' and in academia more broadly. As part of this autoethnographic approach, we describe our personal experience and situate it in wider discussions about the topic, therefore going beyond a mere description of experiences (Wall 2006; Dauphinée 2010). By examining both our experiences, those of a Christian man and a Muslim woman in different contexts in 'the field' but the same context 'back home', we make space for an intersectional exploration (Crenshaw 1989; Lykke 2010) of the role of gender, faith and racialised religion in religious positionalities. Autoethnographic approaches are still rare in political science, although an increasing number of researchers have used them in recent years (Burnier 2006; Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Rhodes 2021). They are particularly useful when reflecting on personal experiences or positionalities, as they allow for a careful examination of detail followed by their contextualisation into wider debates (Roth, 2009).

In the next sections, we reflect about our religious positionality as political science researchers – both while doing field research and in academia more generally. We focus on the key themes that have emerged from the literature review: questions revolving around rapport, access, the intersectional complexities of religious positionalities, possibilities and tensions. Religious positionalities are not static, so whenever relevant, we show how they have changed over time and in various contexts. The focus on both our experience in 'the field' and academia more generally is important, as the assumption that 'the field' is inherently different remains widespread in political science research. By considering our experiences both in 'the field' and in academia more generally, our article challenges this often artificial division.

Seb: Researching ethno-religious politics in upland Vietnam

My research project explored the everyday politics of Christianisation among the Hmong, a marginalised and impoverished ethnic minority group spread across the borderlands of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. They have long been treated by nation states with distrust due to the strong ethnic identity, shared language, resistance to ethnic majority assimilation processes, occasional ethno-nationalist agendas and revolt against encroachment on their land (Culas and Michaud 2004). In the past 30 years, Vietnam's highlands have witnessed a remarkable religious transformation as hundreds of thousands of Hmong converted to Evangelical Christianity (Ngô 2016), which is considered by the socialist state as a subversive Western religion associated with imperialism in Vietnam's history (Taylor 2007). In the context of an authoritarian state which restricts free speech, and especially suppresses all criticism towards state actors or policies (Thayer 2014), religious tensions become politically sensitive 'problems' with 'the potential to cause physical, emotional or psychological distress to participants or the researcher' (Elmir et al., 2011). Only in recent years has it become viable for foreign social scientists to gain fieldwork access to research such issues among the Hmong in Vietnam, with previous academics being forbidden (Sowerwine 2013: 100).

My fieldwork combined in-depth interviews and focus groups with ethnographic observation over a period of 3 months between 2016 and 2017. On several occasions, I was stopped by local police officers whose presence put an end to the possibility of open conversations, and more than once my research assistant warned against asking about religion to certain households with connections to the Communist Party. When I explained that I did not want to cause any trouble but that it was a crucial part of the research, my assistant suggested framing questions in a negative light. For instance, a question like 'do you think the Hmong are losing their culture?' would insinuate common critiques of Christianity, which rejects traditional Hmong rituals – in order to allay concerns that I might be a foreign evangelist or someone trying to extract information for subversive purposes. This turned into a productive dialogue with my assistant about state-sponsored religious discrimination, surveillance and self-censorship in upland Vietnam, and my willingness to be somewhat flexible with the interview content enabled me to benefit from local insights instead of getting myself (and potentially my assistant) into trouble by imposing my pre-determined research agenda onto a very politically sensitive situation.

As a tall white Westerner, there was no chance of me being mistaken for a local and gaining a truly 'insider' perspective among Hmong communities in the remote Vietnamese highlands. This did not necessarily limit my access since I was seen as something of a novelty – indeed, I was the first Westerner that some people had ever spoken to. Furthermore, having an outsider identity can be useful for obtaining unspoken 'insider' meanings (Kapiszewski et al., 2015: 260), since it was often assumed that I knew absolutely nothing about Vietnam, despite being fluent in Vietnamese. My Christian identity also presented important opportunities and obstacles among the Hmong. Most clearly, my attendance of church meetings as a (non-participant) observant afforded to me a degree of 'insider' status within the Christian community and enabled me to quickly build common ground and trust with fellow believers. This shared identity established my 'membership

credentials' (Bositis, 1988) and was certainly a factor behind my success in discussing politically sensitive issues with people I had only recently met, many of whom had directly experienced harassment from local authorities for being associated with, and speaking about, Christianity.

On the other hand, this very same religious positionality posed potential barriers to accessing non-Christian Hmong households in a community which had been divided by conversion and state-sponsored religious persecution. Christian and non-Christians lived side by side in the same village but harboured mutual animosity and mistrust, often based on past grievances but also mutual misunderstandings, so both groups tended to keep to themselves. The rare incidents that I witnessed when social gatherings or family relations to cross the religious divide were marked by tension. For example, on one occasion, my non-Christian Hmong research assistant was accused by Hmong Christian interviewees of misinterpreting their responses, since they assumed that he would portray Christianity negatively to me. During another focus group between four old friends, the one non-Christian got very uncomfortable and defensive when the three Christians talked pejoratively about traditional Hmong religious customs – what started as a friendly chat suddenly became very awkward.

In an attempt to mitigate the distancing effects of such religious polarisation, I decided not to declare my religious identity when meeting and interviewing research participants. If directly asked, I would say that I was a Christian – but from a different denomination (since the Church of England is unheard of in Vietnam's highlands), in order to distance myself from the local expression of Christianity. This was a fine line to tread, as I naturally wanted to avoid the deception associated with what Peshkin (1984) calls 'the calculated use of masks and roles' integral to participant observation. Having established myself with the Hmong Christians, my ambitious research agenda led me to seek a middle ground with a foot in both camps and gain the trust of non-Christians too. However, balancing this 'methodological tightrope' (Aston et al., 2015) soon proved untenable, as the next episode reveals.

Participant intoxication and its discontents

An essential form of male bonding among the Hmong is communal alcohol consumption, and most (non-Christian) households would distil their own liquor from rice or corn (Turner et al., 2015). However, the variant of Christianity preached among the Hmong completely forbade drinking alcohol, and converts have taken this very seriously. In addition to the rejection of traditional Hmong rituals, the ban on alcoholism caused a huge rupture within communities and families – as one non-Christian told me, 'drinking together makes us brothers' – so Christian abstention was understandably interpreted as an offensive rejection of traditional kinship ties.

For an outsider like me attempting to observe everyday life through immersive, ethnographic methods, alcohol consumption was unavoidable. Throughout my fieldwork time – and especially over the new year period – copious amounts of maize liquor were consumed and offered to me, at least every evening and sometimes during mornings and afternoons too. Some anthropologists advocate 'participant intoxication' as a way of

moving from 'outsider' towards 'insider' status (Fiskesjö 2010), and indeed from a research perspective these sessions were a productive way of building rapport and putting participants at ease – at least initially. This in turn raises ethical questions about informed consent which must be managed carefully (Aldridge and Charles 2007), although practically speaking it would have been impossible to complete this fieldwork by avoiding intoxicated research participants altogether. Most Hmong people were extremely busy with rural livelihoods, and the only times where they were free to unwind and talk was when they were having a drink during meals or at a festival. Moreover, drinking alcohol with non-Christians ensured I would not be viewed as a potential 'undercover missionary', and allowed the more confident men to openly share their negative opinions about Hmong Christianity.

However, as someone who is unused to drinking large volumes of alcohol in everyday life, I found the frequency and intensity of communal drinking well outside of my comfort zone, both physically and ethically. Part of the problem was that every household's liquor had been distilled uniquely and I could not tell how strong it was until after a few glasses. Desiring to respect my hosts' hospitality, I frequently ended up drinking much more than I had intended, whilst developing face-saving strategies to limit intoxication such as eating large amounts of rice to absorb the alcohol, and well-timed trips to the toilet to avoid the next round of drinks! My research assistant (who was a heavy drinker himself) was sympathetic and declared that I was under no compulsion. Nevertheless, in a context of continuous communal drinking, I felt a strong social pressure to conform and found it difficult to stay sober without appearing impolite – at one point I was physically pulled into the house of the next drinking venue, when all I wanted to do was go home to bed!

In a similar Laotian research context, Petit notes how 'men who drink reluctantly are said to feel superior; conversely, to become intoxicated together is to show esteem, trust, and equality with one's table companions' (Petit, 2013:156). Although I was never forced to drink against my will, there were certainly times when I experienced profound discomfort and embarrassment at either being obliged to drink after initially declining, or finally breaking the comradery by refusing outright. Thus, my efforts to gain some level of 'insider' status among the non-Christian community were marred by occasional tensions and awkwardness. This experience in and of itself was enlightening for my research, allowing me to empathise (in part) with Hmong Christians who choose to avoid all contact with non-Christians rather than face the ordeal of repeatedly refusing demands to partake in 'just one more' drink.

Yet this was not the end of my challenges, as I discovered that my Christian insider status had also been compromised. When I returned to Christian segment of the village, I was taken to one side by one lady who shared her concerns that people were now asking whether I was really a Christian, since rumours were spreading that I had been drinking alcohol with the non-Christians! I was shocked: there were no Christians present at these drinking sessions, how had the word spread so quickly? Due to the severing of relations caused by religious polarisation, I had assumed that Christians and non-Christians would not be regularly communicating. But instead, I was dismayed to realise that it might appear as if I had deceived the Christians about my religiosity in order to gain their trust and elicit sensitive information from them. From then on, I made active attempts to avoid

falling into the 'counterfeit insider' category (Dawson 2010), explaining that my denomination allowed me to drink alcohol, but I am not sure that everyone were entirely convinced.

Nevertheless, this fieldwork 'blunder' again turned out to be informative from a research perspective, since it provided nuance on the nature of this religious divide in the Hmong community. While tension and hostility clearly remained, Christianisation had evidently not entirely destroyed the fabric of the village, as people from both sides of the divide maintained communication (or at least gossip!) and found ways to get on with living in proximity with one another. On the other hand, it exposed the limitations of my attempts to gain insider status among both Christians and non-Christians; rather, I ended up in an uncomfortable liminal space on the margins of, but with some access to, both camps. I shared this space with only a few other villagers – a 'backsliding' Christian man who has failed to give up alcohol and feels like a failure, a non-Christian husband and Christian wife of a rare inter-religious marriage, and so on. Unlike most Hmong people who have little interaction with (and many misconceptions about) the religious 'other', their marginal positionalities enabled these villagers to see past common prejudices and biases. This added to their (and hopefully my) credibility when speaking about sensitive issues concerning religion and social conflict.

Lingering suspicions in the academy

After completing my fieldwork and returning to the UK with rich data and some surprising findings about the potentially empowering impact of Christianisation (Rumsby, 2023), I was eager to present my work to different academic audiences. It was interesting to gauge the reactions of colleagues and peers in a secularised academic environment. After one presentation, an audience member asked whether it was fair to say that religion is fostering development in this context, or was that too simplistic? Immediately, another audience member reflexively quipped that this was an 'almost uncomfortable suggestion', acknowledging her instinctive disposition to view religion in a negative light. At another occasion, after delivering a guest lecture about my research findings, the event organiser (only half-jokingly) mentioned that he had wondered whether I was in fact a covert missionary when he first read the title of my lecture! So it turns out that suspicions of ulterior motives, and questions about my neutrality as a religious researcher, were not limited to communist officials in Vietnam – a theme which Jennifer elaborates upon below.

More broadly, I have found a general hostility within secularised academic spaces towards seeking to understand religious rationalities or perspectives. For example, during a discussion on science and ethics in a postdoctoral research training programme, I was reminded of a relevant provocative observation from a Christian preacher that, in his words, the 'theory of evolution' gives people a good excuse to 'behave like animals'. I shared this religious critique with the intention of drawing parallels to social scientists' critique of the highly problematic 'social Darwinism' which has historically been used to justify imperialism, racism and eugenics (Keyes 2002). Instead, the professor leading the discussion thought I was telling a joke and simply laughed it off, before moving on to a

different point. This is typical of the secular compulsion to reject or dismiss the religious 'other', which is unhelpful for engaging in this aspect of reflexivity. To this end, it may be worth making a distinction between the 'secular' and the 'non-religious' as a reflexive personal identity or faith position – the latter of which can play just as significant a role in considering religious positionalities.

Jennifer: Researching gender and civil war in Lebanon

Why do non-state armed political groups include women as fighters (rather than 'just' militants or supporters)? Female combatants challenge dominant gender stereotypes according to which women are inherently 'peaceful and innocent'. They fascinate and scare. In the last decades, a substantial amount of literature on the roles and experiences of female fighters in non-state armed groups has been published (Eager 2008; Trisko Darden et al., 2019; Gowrinathan 2021). Yet, when I started my field work in Lebanon, we still knew very little about why women participated in combat during the Lebanese civil war(s) which took place between 1975 and 1990. Why were women included as combatants in the various Lebanese and Palestinian militias involved in the war? And why did the numbers and percentages of female fighters in the different militias operating in the Lebanese civil war vary so much (there were no official female fighters in some of the groups, very few in others, and significant numbers in yet others)? A handful of academic book-length studies on the topic had been published (including, e.g. Peteet 1991; André-Dessornes 2013), but none of them looked at all of the major militias involved in the war.

Through an association of former fighters, personal contacts and chance encounters, I quickly gained access to former combatants and militants in Lebanon who had been involved with one of the many militias that had been fighting in the war. The diversity of my interviewees was enormous: former Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Druze, secular, communist, socialist and right-wing fighters (Eggert, 2021). In total, I conducted almost 70 interviews over a total of nearly 4 months in 2015 and 2016. Interviews usually took around an hour and focused on the individual, organisational and contextual factors that led to women's inclusion as fighters in the militias.

Intersectional identities

As a visibly Muslim woman, I expected perceptions of my religious identity to render my field research on the Lebanese civil war to be difficult. My research focused on female militants and fighters in the non-state armed organisations involved in the war – a conflict that is often perceived to play out along religious lines, either between different sects or between 'the religious' and 'the secular'. I knew that while the war had officially ended in 1990, many of the underlying grievances were far from being addressed and that there had been regular violent episodes between 1990 and 2015 (when I started my fieldwork). While I knew that religion was not at the root of any of these conflicts (Traboulsi, 2007), I was aware that they were often framed in religious or sectarian terms by at least some. How would, for example, those of my interviewees who had fought with one of the

Christian militias during the war, when your identity as Christian or Muslim could decide upon life or death, react to a visibly Muslim woman interested in their experiences?

While I encountered some difficulties, none of them were important enough to significantly disrupt my research. I was used to casual racism and Islamophobia from the UK (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2022; Mahmoud and Islam, 2022), but in Lebanon it turned out that my ethnicity and race (as a white European), education (as a PhD candidate), my language skills (being fluent in French) and class (having a middle-class background) usually trumped my religious identity as a Muslim – in the sense that even interviewees who expressed Islamophobic views seemed to be at ease speaking with me, treating me courteously. To some extent, this may have been traditional hospitality, but it seems that it was also an expression of the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' narrative (a term shaped by Mamdani (2004) and applied to debates around non-state armed groups and their constituents in Northern Ireland by Rekawek (2013), whereby the dominant majority may generously overlook individual's belonging to a marginalised outgroup if they display desirable traits or are personally known to oneself.

The fact that interviewees were usually referred to me by a former comrade, colleague or family member must have played a role in this context. People were ready to speak with me because we had a mutual connection. I was a Muslim, but one known by someone they trusted. This experience was gendered, too: when driving me back to the main highway from where I would catch my bus to Beirut following our interview, the former Christian militia fighter I had just interviewed asked me commiseratively if I 'had to wear hijab' now that I was married. Hijab was undesirable to him, but the culprit was not me, but a hypothetical oppressive male relative who was 'forcing' me to wear it. His comment was racialized, too, because – as this interviewee knew – my husband was Syrian. Anti-Syrian resentments were nothing new in Lebanon at the time (Alhelou, 2021), but they were on the rise again with the growing influx of refugees from Syria following the Syrian revolution and subsequent war. Many Lebanese felt sympathy for the Syrian refugees, but others were concerned about the rising numbers, and this concern often mixed with racist and Islamophobic views about 'backward' Syrians who 'oppress' their women. As a white European, educated, Francophone woman, I benefitted from these stereotypes as they facilitated access and rapport during my field research, but also often left me feeling incredibly uncomfortable, because I knew that these privileges were based on the marginalisation, exclusion and dehumanisation of others (and not 'any others', but my colleagues, friends and family).

Context matters

Realising that my ethnicity and race, education, language skills and class seemed to trump my religious identity in the eyes of many of my Lebanese interviewees surprised me – because it was so different from my experience in Europe, where often all people could see was my religion, and where my visible Muslimness would lead them to make assumptions about my ethnicity, race, education, language skills and class background. In that regard, context mattered between my experience in Europe and in Lebanon. However, it also mattered within Lebanon, depending on people's backgrounds (overall,

religious and/or conservative Muslims tended to be more welcoming of me than secular Muslims or Christians) and the location of our encounters. I remember two encounters in majority-Christian, middle-class environments where my daughter and I were met with hostility and asked to leave: once outside a French café in Gemmayze, a majority Christian, middle-class neighbourhood of Beirut, and once at a beach in Jbeil, a majority Christian coastal town. In both cases, tensions quickly eased (and people did not mind us staying) when I responded in English.

Context also mattered when it came to clothing. I quickly learned that a black maxi dress (which seemed practical but had no other meaning to me) was generally perceived to be a marker of conservatism by the people I encountered in Lebanon. I also learned that this could not even be balanced out by a rainbow-coloured hijab, as it did in Europe – when one of my interviewees (a former fighter with a communist militia) pointed to my dress and asked if I was 'with ISIS'. For religious reasons, I did not feel comfortable wearing trousers and a long-sleeve blouse or shirt that hit somewhere between the waist and the hip (which seemed to be the go-to outfit for many young, middle-class Lebanese Muslim women), and it was too hot for wearing a tunic over jeans, which I would have opted for in the UK, so I settled on maxi skirts (and sometimes maxi dresses) – but only in light or vibrant colours.

Although at times awkward and uncomfortable, most of these situations had no direct bearing on my research on the Lebanese civil war. It would have been a problem if people had refused to speak with me – or to share candid insights – but in most cases, people still ended up sharing their experiences from the war openly (even the man who had asked if I was a supporter of ISIS). What these encounters provided me with, though, was an appreciation of the context in Lebanon and of my positionality as a female white European Muslim researcher in that environment. Differences between the various regions and cities of Lebanon, cultural norms, societal constraints and intercommunal relations were all relevant factors in my research (Eggert, 2021), and going through these experiences made me understand a bit better how some of these could unfold in everyday life.

Just as my ethnicity, race, education, gender and class affected my experience as a researcher in Lebanon, so do they in the UK. However, unlike in Lebanon, my religion usually trumps other parts of my identity in the eyes of others – in the sense that people see a *Muslim* woman first, followed by questions of whether she belongs and is 'neutral'. At times, my presence is welcomed as a marker of exoticism or 'diversity'.

Does she belong?

The answer to the question of 'does she belong' is often 'I don't think so'. Like many female Muslim academics wearing hijab (Daniels and Dasoo 2012; Hatem Almakri et al., 2016), I am used to often being the only visible Muslim in the room. Like many of us, I have had people at university mistake me for a student, a visitor, non-academic staff – but not an academic. When they find out, reactions vary, because context matters in the UK, too: I still remember the expression of shock and disbelief on one of my non-Muslim white student's face when she realized I was not a visitor but her teacher, and the joy and

excitement of one of my black students (who, as it later turned out, was Muslim) – because context matters, and so does representation.

The casual Islamophobia I experienced in Lebanon did not affect me that much, but it does in the UK. In Lebanon, it seemed negligible compared to the stories of horror, pain and loss my interviewees shared with me (Eggert, 2021), and Lebanon was not home. Islamophobia in Lebanon was an unpleasant experience I could leave there. In the UK that is not possible. I belong here, and dealing with Islamophobia in my country is much harder than elsewhere. Like in Lebanon, clothes are also markers of identity in the UK. While I feel less pressure in the UK to dress a certain way to avoid being perceived as 'extremist' than I did in Lebanon, I use clothing in the UK too to make a statement – but more to myself than to anyone else. I wear my favourite colours and accessories to feel beautiful and confident – which is much needed in an environment that feels as hostile as British academia does to many Muslims (Mahmud and Islam, 2022). In such an environment, whiteness is the norm and therefore Muslims, as a racialised minority are marginalised and excluded (Arday and Mirza, 2018). Similar to the society around it, at best it makes us feel like we are not the norm, and at worst, actively targets us for our faith, sees as a threat and treats us as backward and either oppressive or oppressed, relying on common orientalist tropes (Said, 1978; Abu-Lughod, 2015).

I often feel most welcome and comfortable in feminist academic spaces, because many feminists tend to have a much deeper understanding of the meaning of concepts such as solidarity, resistance or intersectionality. However, many feminists feel uneasy about religion (Juschka, 2001; Bagley and McIntosh, 2006), so there is a risk of another form of alienation. What has worked for me so far is building community with small groups of people who understand the impact such forms of exclusion can have. As a believer, I also find strength in my faith.

Is she neutral?

I had expected interviewees in Lebanon to question my neutrality due to my religion, which was rarely the case, as I found out once in the country. In stark contrast, in academic spaces in the UK my 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' as a Muslim researcher is regularly questioned by colleagues, in staff meetings, at conferences. These tend to either be based on an underlying assumption that secular approaches are neutral and religious ones not, or on the notion that expressions of religion and religious perspectives as such may be acceptable, but only within the parameters defined by the dominant majority. There is often also a distinct colonial element added to this, whereby 'civilised' researchers abiding by white principles by leaving religion out of the equation are considered 'neutral' and 'objective', whereas religious researchers, especially if these, like Muslims, are racialised, are considered biased (Aziz, 2021). Accusations of a lack of neutrality are not simply annoying but can become downright dangerous for a Muslim studying political violence and terrorism. The negative effects of Prevent – the part of the British counterterrorism strategy focused on 'prevention' – on Muslim students and academics is well-researched (Scott-Baumann, 2020; Sabir, 2022), and I know that I could also be targeted.

She is exotic!

In Lebanon, most of my interviewees saw me as a European before seeing me as a Muslim. When I spoke about this with a Lebanese friend of mine, she commented that this may be an incentive to some of them, who may consider speaking to a European 'interesting'. If that was the case, I benefitted from it because it helped with access. Similarly, in the UK, there are times when I benefit from people perceiving me to be 'interesting' or 'exotic', because I am the only visibly Muslim female colleague in the room. As awkward as this colonial hangover may be, it has often worked in my favour and opened up opportunities – be it during field research in Lebanon or more generally in academia, when I was invited to participate in research, conferences and consultancies on account of my identity as a visibly Muslim woman.

Themes for discussion

Intersectionality and context

In spite of the differences between our research questions, fieldwork contexts and methods, we can identify a number of key themes emerging out of our shared experience as researchers with religious identities. Firstly, it is crucial to take an intersectional approach when seeking to understand religious positionalities. Contrary to intuitive assumptions about the primacy of religion in areas with a history of religious conflict, Jennifer found that her ethnicity, gender, education and class were usually more important in building rapport and facilitating research access in Lebanon than religious identity. This was based on a construction of 'good vs bad Muslims' (a narrative that was clearly gendered and racialised), therefore not vilifying all expressions of religiosity but only some that were deemed undesirable. Meanwhile, due to his gender, Seb became embroiled in the religious complexities, tensions and dilemmas of participant intoxication which might have been largely avoided by a female researcher. In the Vietnamese context, having a specifically *male* (non-)religious positionality is more of a potential bone of contention due to the cultural norms of communal drinking – indeed, its rejection was identified by Hmong Christian men as the most difficult lifestyle change associated with conversion.

Related to this point, it is important to recognise that 'the field' is not a uniform place but, rather a contextualised space where different intersections of the researcher's positionality rise to prominence with different research participants and also over time (Denning et al., 2022). In turn, these dynamics reveal how people view religion, what role they think it should have in public life and how valuable the relationship with members of their own or other religious communities is to them – a nuanced insight which might be missed by non-religious researchers, just as insights about race might be missed by a white researcher who conducts research amongst other white researchers and is simply not aware of his whiteness, or a man who has never had to reflect on gender in the same way that a woman may have. Accordingly, researchers would be well-advised to be reflexive about contextual developments during the fieldwork which might accentuate or challenge

religious positionalities over time, and how that might affect the data collected at different stages of the research. Seb's fieldwork relationships were not only affected by changing insider-outsider dynamics with respect to Christian and non-Christian communities but also external events over which he had no control. For instance, heightened Sino-Vietnamese border tensions or unauthorised mass religious gatherings elsewhere in Vietnam's highlands (Rumsby 2018) had the potential to suddenly bring the researcher's and research participants' ethno-religious identities to the fore, and seal the lips of previously talkative interlocuters. Similarly, significant external events, including the war in Syria, migration of Syrian refugees to Lebanon and the rise of ISIS, had an impact on how Jennifer was perceived in her religious positionality during her fieldwork in Lebanon.

Moreover, contrasting Seb's and Jennifer's experiences also highlights the situated differences between race, ethnicity, religion and gender across different spaces and contexts (Wetherell 1996), some of which are more 'fluid' than others (Gunasekara 2007). As a white European in Vietnam, Seb could not hide his race and ethnicity; however, he could decide when and how to disclose his religious identity. Back in the UK, as an academic Seb is presumed to be non-religious precisely due to his ethnic/national background, and the aforementioned secular assumptions of the academy. For Jennifer, as a woman wearing hijab, her (formal) religious identity was obvious in both 'the field' and 'the academy', whereas her ethnicity was less easily discerned. While the extent to which different intersectional markers play out in a given context will vary, it is important to bear this complexity in mind and carefully include analyses of gender, race, ethnicity, class and education (and possibly others) when examining religious positionalities.

Insider–outsider dynamics

Seb's attempts to build trust amongst two hostile groups within the same village – Christians and non-Christians – led him to engage with the method of 'participant intoxication' in ways which neither comfortable nor entirely successful. While in theory, ethnographic methods require the researcher to fully immerse themselves within the everyday life of the research community, in practice there are often physical, emotional or ethical limits to which the researcher is willing or able to go in radically unfamiliar contexts (Cornet 2013) – for instance, inability to sleep in a host's house, feeling unsafe or having an aversion to heavy inebriation. There has always been a spectrum within participant observation ranging from 'complete participant' to 'participant-as-observer', 'observer-as-participant' and 'complete observer' (Gold 1958) – all of which have advantages and disadvantages.

Due to the mutual incompatibility of drinking practices on different points of the religious spectrum, Seb ended up in a liminal space on the margins of, but with some access to, both sides. This position was somewhat akin to Collins' (1986) concept of the 'outsider within' which, while uncomfortable, offer 'distinctive angle of vision' from which unique insights are possible. In politically sensitive contexts, it is not usually possible to please everyone, so researchers must choose carefully who to align themselves with (including gatekeepers or research assistants), since this can simultaneously alienate them from other social groups (Reeves 2010). Insider/outsider dynamics are influenced by

not only religious identity but also perceived levels of religiosity as well as dynamics and inequalities within religious communities, for instance, the marginalised Hmong Christian men who had not given up alcohol. While some more devout neighbours questioned whether they (and Seb) were 'real' Christians at all, researchers would do well to avoid essentialising or dichotomising 'religious' and 'non-religious' categories (Williams 2017).

Unlike Seb, when out and about in the streets of Beirut, Jennifer very much looked like a local. Fair skin and blue eyes are not a rarity amongst Lebanese Muslims, and the hijab and long dresses or maxi skirts she was wearing made her fit seamlessly. Even when in conversations with interviewees, gatekeepers or people on the street, it turned out that her Arabic was far from perfect, people often assumed that she was still 'one of theirs' by suspecting that she had been raised abroad (like many Lebanese in the post-war era), was half-Lebanese or, at the very least, married to a Lebanese husband. Jennifer's experience therefore seemed to illustrate that perceptions of who is an outsider/insider also cuts through communities, often along religious lines as well as in gendered and racialised forms: a female ('oppressed') Muslim is better than a male ('oppressing') one; a practicing Muslim is 'annoying' but not 'as bad as' a member of ISIS; hijab in vibrant colours is 'acceptable' but a black maxi dress is 'a bit too much'…

In and out of 'the field'

Finally, it is instructive to reflect on the comparisons between religious positionalities during fieldwork and within academia more broadly. Conceptualisations of 'the field' have been criticised in recent years for exceptionalising and othering sites of fieldwork, especially in marginalised communities (Amit 1999; Söderström 2011). Our approach here of examining religious positionalities both during fieldwork and in academic spaces more broadly builds on these debates and aims to expand perspectives that highlight the continuities inside and outside 'the field'. Indeed, both authors experienced overlapping challenges associated with our religious identities in and out of 'the field', be that suspicions of ulterior motives, a lack of 'neutrality' or outright discrimination and ex-clusion. This undermines the 'us and them' dichotomy that academics can slip into when studying the outside world, as if the 'ivory tower' were somehow immune from influences from its broader socio-political-historical context. Secular approaches remain widespread in academia, as does a perception of religious perspectives being intrinsically biased, whereas secularity is implicitly presented as 'neutral'. This partly reflects that fact that academic discourse is largely dominated by Western scholars who work in universities rooted in the 'anti-spiritual' epistemologies (Deo 2018: 34) of the Enlightenment, re-gardless of the potentially high religiosity of their societies (as e.g. in the USA). Meanwhile, academic voices from communities where the public-secular versus private-religious dichotomy may be less prominent, are marginalised by politico-economic structures within academia.

That is not to say that there are *no* differences between fieldwork and academic contexts. For example, Jennifer found it easier to write about her encounters in Lebanon, which were for a limited time and can now be reflected upon from a distance, because she

remained an outsider. In contrast, her ongoing experiences of marginalisation back home in the UK are more difficult to reconcile where she feels a sense of belonging and, therefore, a right to be treated like an insider. Unlike Jennifer, Seb's clothing does not mark him out as a religious person and therefore his religious positionality may go largely unnoticed within the academy, but this in turn can lead to the possibility of being suspected of 'covert' religious motives when discussing the study of religion. Being accused of having ulterior religious motives can have very serious consequences for religious researchers including discrimination, surveillance and even criminalisation, as numerous Muslim researchers in the post-9/11 era and Western or Christian researchers in countries such as Iran can testify to (see, e.g. Akel 2021; BBC 2020).

Reflections on ruptures and continuities in researchers' positionalities during field-work, in academia more broadly as well as during researchers' personal lives, can help dismantle artificial boundaries between the personal and the academic, challenging strictly upheld divisions that simply do not exist for many researchers, especially those from marginalised backgrounds.

Conclusion

This article is not an exhaustive list of all possible fieldwork and academic dynamics which can arise for political scientists researching religious conflict. Instead, we have focused on two autoethnographic case studies to highlight some key themes of how the diversity of religious positionalities can play out in contexts as different as Lebanon and Vietnam. While we have focused on our individual experiences, we are aware that many of the issues evolving around religious positionalities that we have encountered in our work are not exclusive to our work but arise in religious researchers' work more generally, especially if it focuses on religion or religion is a key factor in the communities that they work in. In particular, we highlight three empirical themes: (1) the importance of taking an intersectional approach which neither essentialise nor ignores religious aspects of po-sitionality, and acknowledges both privileges and vulnerabilities linked to one's religious positionality, whilst also being sensitive to spatial and temporal shifts in how they interact with a researcher's gender, ethnicity, class and other identifiers; (2) the opportunities and perils of a researcher's apparent religious common ground with participants (or lack thereof) in building rapport and negotiating a degree of insider status; and (3) the similarities and differences between suspicions of religious partialism during fieldwork and within academia.

We therefore contribute to the wider literature on religious positionalities by applying some of the earlier discussions on the topic, especially from human geography, to political science which has largely neglected this subject. By elaborating on some of the com-plexities, tensions and challenges of researching religious politics within shared and across different faith communities, we touch upon some uncomfortable dynamics both in and out of the field in order to discuss the question of 'academic theophobia' within political sciences, hoping to help move the debate in our discipline away from secularised notions of 'objective' methodological atheism (Porpora 2006), and to highlight that both religious and non-religious positionalities may have different (but potentially equally

challenging) fieldwork impacts. We conclude this article in the hope that an increased sensitivity vis-à-vis questions of religious (and secular) positionalities and dynamics amongst researchers and the various academic and non-academic communities they engage with will ultimately help us become better, more self-reflective and aware, researchers.

This is not a call for researchers to instrumentally exploit their shared identities to secure access and build rapport among religious communities. Crucially, we argue that the very predicaments, awkward encounters and even 'blunders' experienced by religious researchers can generate unique insights on important political research questions (Gros 2013). As Seb and Jennifer's case studies show, they can reveal the relative importance of religious/non-religious identities for different people or contexts and, to a degree, allow the researcher to empathise with research participants' experiences of religious discrimination or conflict. Therefore, instead of being treated as a cause for suspicion, a researcher's religious positionality should be considered as a potential strength in not only facilitating fieldwork and academic research more broadly but also understanding the complex dynamics of religious tensions – especially in politically sensitive contexts.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Seb Rumsby Ⓡ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8190-4874

Note

1. For example, during a joint supervision meeting for Seb's PhD program in politics and international studies, his secondary supervisor from the sociology department expressed shock when the primary supervisor declared that most Politics PhD theses did not contain more than a few paragraphs about research methods and ethics!

References

Abu-Lughod L (2015) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Akel S (2021) *Institutionalised: The Rise of Islamophobia in Higher Education*. [online] Centre for Equity and Inclusion, London Metropolitan University. Available from: https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/media/london-metropolitan-university/london-met-documents/professional-service-departments/centre-for-equity-and-inclusion/

research-reports/Institutionalised–%C3%82%C2%A0The-Rise-of-Islamophobia-in-Higher-Education.pdf

Aldridge J and Charles V (2008) Researching the intoxicated: Informed consent implications for alcohol and drug research. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 93(3): 191–196.

Alhelou H (2021) *Racist Securitization of Refugees, Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: A Case Study.* AUC Knowledge Fountain: Master's Thesis, the American University in Cairo]. https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/1677/

Amit V (1999) *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World.* Basingstoke: Routledge.

André-Dessornes C (2013) *Les Femmes-Martyres Dans Le Monde Arabe: Liban, Palestine et Irak.* Paris: L'Harmattan.

Arday J and Mirza HS (2018) *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy.* London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Aston K, Cornish H and Joyce A (2015) Plotting belonging: Interrogating insider and outsider status in faith research. *Diskus* 17(1): 1–13.

Aziz S (2021) *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bagley K and McIntosh K (2006) (eds), *Women's Studies in Religion: A Multicultural Reader.* Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Bailey AR, Brace C and Harvey DC (2009) Three geographers in an archive: Positions, predilections and passing comment on transient lives. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34(2): 254–269.

Bashir N (2018) Doing research in peoples' homes: Fieldwork, ethics and safety–on the practical challenges of researching and representing life on the margins. *Qualitative Research* 18(6): 638–653.

Bayrakli E and Hafez F (2022) (eds), *European Islamophobia Report.* Vienna: Leopold Weiss Institute. https://islamophobiareport.com/islamophobiareport-2021.pdf

BBC (2020) Kylie moore-gilbert: Lecturer released by iran 'in prisoner swap'. Available from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55077744

Beaumont J, Eder K and Mandieta E (2018) Reflexive secularisation? concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity. *European Journal of Social Theory* 23(3): 1–19.

Bositis DA (1988) 'Some Observations on the Participant Method', Political Behavior, 10(4): 333–348.

Brigg M and Bleiker R (2010) Autoethnographic international relations: Exploring the self as a source of knowledge. *Review of International Studies* 36(3): 779–798.

Burnier DL (2006) Encounters with the self in social science research: A political scientist looks at autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(4): 410–418.

Cammett M (2013) Using proxy interviewing to address sensitive topics. In: Mosley L (ed.), *Interview Research in Political Science.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 125–143.

Collins PH (1986) Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems* 33(6): 14–32.

Cornet C (2013) The fun and games of taking children to the field in Guizhou, China. In: Turner S (ed). *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 80–99.

Crenshaw K (1989) Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140: 139–167.

Culas C and Michaud J (2004) A contribution to the study of Hmong (Miao) migrations. In: Tapp N, Michaud J, Culas C and Lee GY (eds). *Hmong/Miao in Asia*. Thailand: Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Daniels D and Dasoo N (2012) Muslim women academics in higher education: Reflections from South Africa In: Terence L (ed.), *Women in Islam Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Research*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 185–195.

Dauphinée E (2010) The ethics of autoethnography. *Review of International Studies* 36(3): 799–818.

Dawson A (2010) Positionality and role-identity in a new religious context: Participant observation at céu do mapiá. *Religion* 40: 173–181.

Denning S, Scriven R and Slatter R (2022) 'three participatory geographers: Reflections on positionality and working with participants in researching religions, spiritualities, and faith'. *Social and Cultural Geography* 23(2): 892–910.

Deo N (2018) *Postsecular Feminisms: Religion and Gender in Transnational Context*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

De Koning M, Bartels E and Koning D (2012) 'Claiming the researcher's identity: Anthropological research and politicized religion'. *Fieldwork in Religion* 6(2): 168–186.

Douglas K and Carless D (2013) 'A History of Autoethnographic Inquiry'. In: Holman Hones S, Adams TE, Ellis C and Walnut Creek CA (eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography*: Left Coast Press, 84–106.

Eager PW (2008) *From freedom fighters to terrorists: Women and political violence*. Hampshire. Ashgate.

Eggert JP (2021) *Women and the Lebanese Civil War: Female Fighters in Lebanese and Palestinian Militias*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ellis C, Adams T and Bochner AP (2011) Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12(1): 10.

Elmir R, Schmied V, Jackson D, et al. (2011) Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. *Nurse Researcher* 19(1): 12–16.

Evans-Pritchard E (1964) *Essays in Social Anthropology*. New York: Free Press.

Ferber MP (2006) Critical realism and religion: Objectivity and the insider/outsider problem. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96(1): 176–181.

Fiskesjö M (2010) Participant intoxication and self–other dynamics in the wa context. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 11(2): 111–127.

Gold RL (1958) Roles in Sociological Field Observations. *Social Forces* 36(3): 217–223.

Gowrinathan N (2021) *Radicalizing Her*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gros S (2013) 'Blunders in the field: An ethnographic situation among the drung people in Southwest China'. In: Turner S (ed.), *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 43–60.

Gunasekara C (2007) Pivoting the centre: Reflections on undertaking qualitative interviewing in academia. *Qualitative Research* 7(4): 461–475.

Haraway DJ (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599.

Hatem A, Samah S, Idris Ket al. (2016) Challenges faced Muslim women leaders in higher education. *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 6(3): 76–86.

Henkel R (2011) Are geographers religiously unmusical? Positionalities in geographical research on religion. *Erdkunde* 65(4): 389–399.

Juschka D (2001) *Feminism in the Study of Religion*. London, NY: Continuum.

Kapinga L, Huizinga R and Shaker R (2020) 'Reflexivity through positionality meetings: Religion, muslims and "non-religious" researchers'. *International Journal of Social Research Methods*.25(1): 103–117

Kapiszewski D, MacLean LM and Read BL (2015) *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keyes C (2002) "The peoples of Asia"—science and politics in the classification of ethnic groups in Thailand, China, and vietnam. *The Journal of Asian* 61(4): 1163–1203.

Kong L (2001) Mapping "new" geographies of religion: Politics and poetics in modernity. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(2): 211–233.

Lykke N (2010) *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. Basingstoke: Routledge.

Mahmud A and Islam M (2022) Intersectional oppression: A reflexive dialogue between Muslim academics and their experiences of Islamophobia and exclusion in UK higher education. *Sociology Compass* 17.

Mamdani M (2004) *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

Mednicoff D (2015) Religious identity and social science research in the middle east. Available from: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2015/08/26/religious-identity-and-social-science-research-in-the-middle-east/

Megoran N (2004) On faith and vocation: Christianity and political geography. On faith and geopolitical imagination. *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs* 2(2): 40–46.

Miled N (2019) Muslim researcher researching Muslim youth: Reflexive notes on critical ethnography, positionality and representation. *Ethnography and Education* 14(1): 1–15.

Ngô TTT (2016) *The New Way: Hmong Protestantism in Vietnam*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Peshkin A (1984) Odd man out: The participant observer in an absolutist setting. *Sociology of Education* 57(4): 254–264.

Peteet J (1991) *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Petit P (2013) 'The Backstage of Ethnography as Ethnography of the State: Coping with Officials in the Lao People's Democratic Republic' in Turner Sarah (ed.) *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 143-164.

Porpora DV (2006) Methodological atheism, methodological agnosticism and religious experience. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36(1): 57–75.

Reeves CL (2010) A difficult negotiation: Fieldwork relations with gatekeepers. *Qualitative Research* 10(3): 315–331.

Rekawek P (2013) Conducting field research on terrorism in Northern Ireland. In: Dolnik A (ed.), *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide*: Routledge.

Rhodes RA (2021) Autoethnography and political studies. In: Hodgett S (ed.), *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities : Blurring Genres*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roth Wolff-Michael (2009) Auto/Ethnography and the Question of Ethics. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 10(1).

Rumsby S (2018) Rumours, sects and rallies: The ethnic politics of recent hmong millenarian movements in vietnam's highlands. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(7): 1347–1367.

Rumsby S (2023) *Development in Spirit: Religious Transformation and Everyday Politics in Vietnam's Highlands*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Sabir R (2022) *The Suspect: Counterterrorism, Islam, and the Security State*. London: Pluto Press.

Sack RD (1997) *Homo Geographicus. A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Said E (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

Scott-Baumann A, Guest M, Naguib S, et al. (2020) *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Singh G, Marquette H and Alolo NA (2007) *Political Science, Religion and Development: A Literature Review*. Birmingham: Religions and Development WP7.

Söderström O (2011) Redefining the field: Auto-ethnographic notes. *Cultural Geographies* 18(1): 115–118.

Soedirgo J and Glas A (2020) Toward active reflexivity: Positionality and practice in the production of knowledge. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 53(3): 527–531.

Sowerwine J (2013) Socialist Rules and Postwar Politics: Reflections on Nationality and Fieldwork among the Yao in Northern Vietnam. In: Turner S (ed.), *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 100–120.

Stump R (2008) *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Taylor P (2007) *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Thayer C (2014) 'The Apparatus of Authoritarian Rule in Vietnam'. In: London J (ed.), *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 135–161.

Traboulsi F (2007) *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press.

Trisko Darden J, Henshaw A and Szekely O (2019) *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Turner S, Bonnin C and Michaud J (2015) *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Valentine G (2002) People like US: Negotiating sameness and difference in the research process. In: Moss P (ed.), *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 116–132.

van der Geest S (1990) Anthropologists and missionaries: Brothers under the skin. *New Series* 25(4): 588–601.

Wall S (2006) An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(2): 146–160.

Wetherell M (1996) *Identities, Groups and Social Issues*. London: Sage.

Williams A (2016) Spiritual landscapes of pentecostal worship, belief, and embodiment in a therapeutic community: New critical perspectives. *Emotion, Space and Society* 19: 45–55.

Yorgason E and della Dora V (2009) Geography, religion, and emerging paradigms: problematizing the dialogue. *Social and Cultural Geography* 10(6): 629–637.

Author biographies

Seb Rumsby is an interdisciplinary researcher with a wide range of interests including everyday politics, labour exploitation, undocumented migration, ethno-religious politics, grassroots development and non-national histories.

Jennifer Philippa Eggert is a researcher and practitioner working on political violence, international development and humanitarian action, with a focus on gender, faith and local actors.