RESPONSE TO STEVEN SUTCLIFFE

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I would like to thank Steven Sutcliffe for a robust and stimulating paper. He leaps right in with two very challenging questions, asking first, "Have we satisfactorily resolved the methodological questions of our discipline?", to which I would honestly but without despair reply "No".

However, to the question, "Can methodological serendipity on the one hand, and comparative and systematic study on the other plausibly co-exist?" I would respond, "Yes". This is because we are human beings interacting with other human beings, and one of the most wonderful, exciting and frequently frustrating things about fieldwork (the methodological area with which I am primarily concerned; see Bowman 1992) is that we can never be entirely in control of the interaction—nor should we necessarily seek to be so (Lawless 1991). I believe it comes with the territory. We can be completely professional and systematic in our approach, but as individual human beings have different emotional and spiritual boiling points, as it were. I tend to doubt if we can ever be truly "scientific" in the old-fashioned, conventional sense. Physics and metaphysics may be coming closer in some branches of scholarship, but as yet that has not impacted on fieldwork.

Sutcliffe makes the point that the practice or pursuit of religion cannot be conflated with the study of religion. However, that is a frequent misapprehension. For example, certain strands of the Interfaith movement cannot understand why we scholars do not use our knowledge to demonstrate how religions are "all the same really" and to promote some sort of universalistic spirituality. Similarly, at Bath Spa University College, my department's title, Study of Religions, is an attempt to circumvent this very difficulty, trying to make it clear that people here are studying religions—they are not religious people studying. While conducting fieldwork in Newfoundland in 1995, I was interviewing a Pentecostal pastor who vehemently denounced Religious Studies as dangerous, claiming that nothing was worth the risk that, by telling young people about other religions, we would cause them to waver in their faith and lose their soul. So, it is worth...
reflecting that to outsiders (and indeed, to some other scholars) what we do can seem puzzling, pointless or downright dangerous.

Sutcliffe draws our attention to "methodological atheism", a term still too frequently used and sadly misunderstood, as some, especially scientists and certain social scientists, seem unable to recognize that atheism, scepticism or disbelief are themselves forms of belief. Sutcliffe also mentions the more "politically correct" methodological agnosticism and phenomenological epoché. Concerning the latter, while acknowledging its roots, I think that those of us who are, as it were, Ninian Smart’s scholarly offspring would see our current reading of phenomenology, and our use of phenomenological epoche as severed from any theological agenda.

Our scholarly activity, Sutcliffe points out, is a secondary order procedure depending upon the primary phenomena. In this respect we are in familiar territory. Ninian Smart, in *The Phenomenon of Religion* comments that the researcher in religion

is parasitic upon the Expresser, obviously; his advantage only is that he can survey a broad range of religious acts, and this is not the primary aim of, and often is not within the competence of, the Expresser. (1973: 33)

Similarly, Brede Kristensen wrote in *The Study of the History of Religion*:

Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the believer's testimony. (Sharpe 1986: 228)

On the inevitability of some form of reductionism I must agree; in our endeavor to increase understanding we do interpose ourselves between the phenomenon and those involved therein and the outside world, and this is tricky. I quoted Kristensen above. There is perhaps more of a problem with how Kristensen proceeds:

but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and the evaluation of the believers, we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and are concerned only with ourselves. (Sharpe 1986: 228)

In much of what we do, we are simultaneously trying to reflect the opinion and evaluation of the believers, while not imposing our opinion on the account. That is, we try to keep our scholarly voice and our personal voice separate. Here the notion of emic and etic, and the analogy of the translator work very well, for the good translator