The history of religions has traditionally been associated with the study of texts. Unlike their anthropological colleagues, historians of religion themselves have rarely ventured into the field. When they have, it has sometimes looked more like a “grand tour” than fieldwork. But now more students are doing fieldwork, spending considerable time living in and learning about particular religious communities. The question is, to what extent does fieldwork—should fieldwork—constitute an important element in the history of religions? Are there ways of reconciling the traditional text-based methods with participant-observation in contemporary religious communities?

Of course, textual and fieldwork approaches have not always been rigidly separated; they have been integrated in various ways. On the one hand, the textual qualities of fieldwork were pushed to the forefront not that long ago. On the other hand, methods and theories derived from anthropological fieldwork have been imported into the study of texts. What I would like to consider is another possible connection between the two approaches. I would propose that textual study—the mainstay of history of religions—may, under certain conditions, involve a kind of fieldwork. For convenience I call this studying “native” texts. But the use of the word “native” is problematic, and in fact raises some thorny methodological and theoretical issues, which I will briefly consider at the end. I want to begin, however, by talking about how the study of texts, at least in certain situations, may involve something akin to fieldwork. What I have in mind are those times when the student must vacate the armchair and head abroad in order to examine texts firsthand. Probably the most common reason for doing so is that the material in question has not been published. One could think of this as a kind of textual fieldwork. That is, the student engages the texts in their homeland and with the help of resident experts. In doing so, the student may find him- or herself struggling with many of the same logistical, political, and intellectual issues that fieldworkers typically encounter. To illustrate the point I will briefly discuss my own experience of studying medieval Slavonic texts in Russia.
A few years ago I was doing research on medieval Slavonic literature in Russia. I was studying a particular text, an Old Testament apocryphon. Apocryphal literature was important and widespread in medieval Russia, so I wanted to understand how and why one such text was produced and disseminated. The text in question first shows up in an eleventh-century manuscript from Kiev. It was subsequently copied and preserved in about a dozen later codices, most of which are now in St. Petersburg. So, I was interested in a particular tradition—one might say a myth—that was told and retold, the tellings of which were inscribed in textual form. In this, my inquiry may have been roughly analogous to fieldworkers who collect and analyze stories, myths, cosmological lore, and other verbal “texts” in their available variants.

Because most copies of this apocryphal text had not been published, I needed to see the actual manuscripts, which are housed in various libraries in St. Petersburg. But accessing the manuscripts was not simple. A research visa and letters of introduction were required. Personal connections certainly helped. Because I was fortunate enough to meet certain well-placed persons, doors were opened to me. I gained access to the material. This, too, was perhaps reminiscent of the fieldwork experience, where patience, tact, timing, money, or charm can help one gain access to communities, families, rituals. For help in understanding these ancient and arcane texts, I turned to local experts, Russian medievalists living in St. Petersburg. These experts were critical in several ways. First, they simply knew the language better than I did. They understood the special vocabulary of the text, they could catch the allusions, and they were at home with the idioms. They also helped me with the intricacies of paleography—the determination of watermarks, handwriting styles, and so forth. Fieldworkers often rely on similar linguistic assistance. More importantly, getting help from these scholars meant dealing with local interpretive paradigms. I was using the texts for my own purposes, as part of my own intellectual construction, and this was rather different from the approach which has characterized Russian literary scholarship for well over a century. The Russian experts had their own way of understanding these texts. Again, this situation would seem to be comparable to fieldwork. Students in the field inevitably encounter resident experts and local schemes of interpretation. The fact that anthropologists often do fieldwork in predominantly oral