NEGOTIATING THE OBJECT. NEARNESS, DISTANCE AND THE CATEGORY ‘RELIGION’ IN ACADEMIC PRACTICES

Abstract

This article critically reflects on the presuppositions of the scholarly study of religion. It does so, by demonstrating the inadequacy of a spatial discourse that is frequently used to demarcate the scholarly study of religion from its object. This spatial discourse is based on the upholding of a sharp demarcation between religion and the academic study of religion, and between object and researcher. This boundary work implies the upholding of a self-evident (and perceived necessary) distance between researcher and object, and between religion and the academic study of religion. We argue that this spatial discourse produces an oversimplification of the researchers’ relationship towards the object of study, which potentially becomes problematic in practical research situations later on. Thus, we urge, not for a rejection of distinction and distance between researcher and object all together, but rather for a heightened awareness of the contingent and negotiated character of this distinction.

Keywords: religion, categorization, academic practice, objectification, boundaries

Introduction

Within the various disciplines that take religion as its object of inquiry there is by no means agreement as to how this object should be conceptualized. As a contested category, religion is subjected to disputes of meaning, use and definition, and the topic of conceptualization and its consequences is a recurring theme of publications and conferences (Smith 1978, 1982; Saler 1993; Platvoet and Molendijk 1999; Fitzgerald 2000; Strenski 2010 – just to mention a few). However, the category is not solely put forward in explicit discussions on definition but is also continuously produced and explored in daily academic practice such as teaching and research. These reproductive practices are embedded within particular institutional contexts at different universities.

Obviously we are not promoting the notion of a connection between knowledge and power and/or between knowledge and specific institutions as a novel idea. This is a by now classical topic explored in the works of e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe etc. What we argue for is a heightened attention on the actual academic prac-
tices in which the production of knowledge takes place. Thus, in this article we present some tendencies of how the category ‘religion’ is used and shaped in daily academic practices at the departments for the Study of Religion at the University of Copenhagen, and we use these to engage in a discussion about how categorization influences subsequent research processes.

During the fall of 2006 we did participant observation at first year courses in the Study of Religion at two Danish Universities. The objective of the participant observation was to examine how the category of ‘religion’ was shaped in daily academic practice and how this category was communicated and taught to the students. One main observation was that the teaching was pervaded by spatial discourses which involved the notion that clear-cut boundaries exist between researcher and object, and that a certain distance between the two is necessary in order to produce ‘proper’ scholarly work. It should be emphasized that even though the empirical field for our discussion is limited to a certain national context, the question about how the scholarly category of religion contributes to setting the relationship between research and object in specific ways is, we argue, of a more general relevance for the study of religion.

In this article, we argue that the spatial discourses further an oversimplification in so far as it makes the distance between researcher and object appears as if it was ontologically self-evident. Consequently, the distance appears unproblematic and objective. This blurs the fact that the analytical distance - needed in order to uphold the objectification of the object – is never set once and for all, but is constantly negotiated whenever the researcher is engaging with the object (Tweed 2002). Sometimes the distance gets too short. This situation potentially makes it difficult to sustain the tension between the language of the researcher and the language of the object of study, which is necessary to uphold an objectification. We term this categorical collapse. At other times the distance between the scholar and the object becomes too large. The scholar can experience this distance as the impossibility of at all grasping the object’s ‘own voice’ with the analytical tools at her/his disposition. We term this categorical incompatibility. Both types of experience prompt a process of negotiation where the researcher seeks to re-establish his or her distance to the object. Making distinctions between researcher and object is of course an intrinsic part of much, if not all, scholarly work. However, our main point is that researchers recognise the provisional character of these distinctions. Otherwise, and especially if the distinctions are applied rigorously in practice, there is a risk that these distinctions possibly become problematic.

The observer observed: a brief outline

The assertion that scholars construct their object of analysis is virtually a commonplace. Most researchers would agree that the object of observation is the result of our choice of methods, our questions and the broader theoretical framing of these. Obviously, huge disagreements exist between different positions regarding the scope of the scholars’ construction, ranging from hardcore constructivism to more or less realist positions (e.g. Trigg 1993; Jensen 2003; Droogers 2008 for discussions). But few
scholars would affirm that the object of inquiry – in this case religion – is simply «out there». In practice however, such claims regarding the relationship between scholar and object often take the form of initial reflections before the researcher can move on with the regular program. Once established the scholar most often acts as if the object exists as an ontological alterity with its own existence, which – fortunately – can still surprise us with new insights not solely given by the research design.

At other times, the process of objectification itself becomes the object of study, as can be seen in the work of for example Talal Asad (1993, 2003), Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, 1988), Benson Saler (1993), David Chidester (1996), Tim Fitzgerald (1997, 2000) or Russell McCutcheon (1997, 2003). As part of broader arguments of ideological critique, these authors all scrutinize the process of scholarly categorization. This kind of work tends to either downplay or question the correspondence of the category religion with a given reality and emphasizes the formative or impositional character of the process of (mis)representation of «the Other». Further, several of these authors argue against the scholarly use of the category of religion altogether, because of its alleged Eurocentric and colonial heritage.

Although we share the overall interest in the formation of the category religion, we do not share the critical claims for abandoning it. Rather in this article we opt for the continuous self-reflective awareness of the category’s entanglement in our practical explorative enterprises (see also Beyer 2003; Strenski 2010). The following should thus be read as a preliminary analysis and discussion of how the category is shaped and communicated in academic practices. By categorization we basically refer to the processes through which things in the world (artifacts, ideas, actions, events, social phenomena etc.) are recognized, differentiated and named as being of a certain kind. Thus, categories are basic tools that we use to grasp and communicate our otherwise (too) complex surroundings (Taylor 2003; Cohen and Lefebvre 2005). In our case, the processes in focus include the recognition, differentiation and naming of something as ‘religion’ (and the related ‘a religion’, ‘religions’, ‘religious’). It is central to our approach that categories are contingent social products that always involve the imposition of a divide on the world, saying this belongs here and that belongs there. These divides always imply a reduction of complexity, and they simultaneously draw the contours of the respective categories and spur certain types of communication (see also Luhmann 1995). Obviously, such divides, however contingent, are not random. They articulate historically sedimented and culturally embedded ideas about reality, and they only exist as long as they are acted on, sustained and sanctioned (Taylor 2003). Thus, they change their meaning, content and boundaries over time, and they are bound or embedded in many different parts of the social fabric: in language, institutions, actions and experiences. While others have pursued the question of category-formation in the study of religion in formal publication (for example Baird 1991; Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 1997), in the following we will pursue these processes of recognition, designation and classification in the daily academic practices of teaching students about religion. And while the context for such studies usually are the broader political ideological landscape regarding religion, our aim here is to ponder the consequences of the categorizations with regards to our practices as scholars.
Data and method

During fall 2006 we conducted participant observation at the obligatory courses in the subject History of Religion at the Universities in Copenhagen and Aarhus, the two largest departments for the study of religion in Denmark. The examples employed are from first year courses at the University of Copenhagen. This means that this teaching is the first step in the long process of building up complexity that makes up academic skills. Of course, this educational setting could involve a gradual sophistication of categorical practices and awareness; replacing along the way the relatively rigid and simple distinctions and approaches with more ambiguous and complex models. However, based on our own experience as students and later on researchers within the field, we argue that the categorical constructions taught in the first year courses forms a stable discursive framework for the subsequent educational process. That is, it prevails and provides the implicit prototypes of what is ‘religion’, ‘a religion’ and being ‘religious’.

In the first year courses, and reflected in the curriculum, the students were taught basic knowledge about religion and the scientific study of it. Two different ways of conceptualizing religion can be identified: one that categorizes a range of phenomena in the world into different, mutually exclusive religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism etc.), and one that rather articulate a broad category, religion in the singular, which gain its meaning and content by being contrasted to the scholarly work associated with reason, science, and politics. These modalities for conceptualizing religion structure the proper ways for the students to behave as scholars. We argue that both types of category formation produce sharp boundaries between the object of study (religion/a religion/being religious) and the scholar as the one observing this object from a distance. In the following we will show how these boundaries are established and discuss what consequences they may have.

Religions in the plural: comparable triangles

At both universities the study guides for the introductory courses in the history of religion are structured into subject areas of different religions, mostly one religion per lesson. Thus, the lectures include one lesson on Hinduism, one on Buddhism, on ancient Greek religion, Roman religion and Nordic religion, while Islam, Christianity and Judaism have their separate courses.

The division of the material into religions is also present in the most commonly used introductory books, typically providing a chapter for each religion. In both teaching and literature a religion is typically presented 1) through a set of basic texts, such as the Qur’an and Hadith, the Vedas, the Old or New Testament, the Eddas, the Upanishads and so forth, 2) through the introduction to the historical setting in which these texts are written, and 3) through a division of the religion into two basic categories that can be distilled from the texts and which pertain to a level of practice/doing (with subcategories like ritual, prayer, divination, sacrifice, or rites of passage) and a level of beliefs/propositions (with subcategories such as myth, cosmology or cosmogony).
Many of the discussions that the students are introduced to, revolve around the relationship between the two. This two-fold division can to some extent also be seen as mirrored in the sociology of religion’s classic interest in attitudes and behavior.

Thus, ‘a religion’ is shaped as a triangle, where the first leg of the triangle consist of religious practices, the second leg of related propositions or beliefs, while the third leg is constituted by a conception of the transcendent/supernatural to which the other two legs relate. These triangles are named e.g. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and consequently a congregation of people subscribing to the package become Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist (see also Smith 1963; Rubow 1999). These triangles of religions are also established through the headlines of the course plans or simply through announcement by the teacher as a speech act: «this is a ritual, this is a cosmology, this is a spell, this is a myth», and through the linkage of these into more or less systematic entities.

These entities may be flexible but they can nevertheless move through time and space from their (often textual) point of origin and still be identified as distinct, and these movements create topics such as «newer, global Christianity», «Islam in South Asia», or «early Hinduism». The entities and their boundaries are of course often challenged by the teachers themselves and by the students, and sometimes they are dissolved all together. But nevertheless they still function, through their initial institution, as the recurring point of reference for any argumentation. Further, the insistence on the comparability between these entities of religion – expressed in teaching as a scholarly virtue – stresses the pattern-like structure of the religions as parallel, equal phenomena basically of the same kind. And each times something or someone is studied; the notion of the triangular category is invoked as a framework which situates the object of study on the inside and the researcher/observer on the outside. This creates a position from where it is possible to see the phenomena as entities of the same kind (ritual, prayer, myth cosmology and so on). It also involves the construction of a situation in which the researcher can analyze the material without the bias pertaining to the religious outlooks under scrutiny (see McCutcheon 1999 for a thorough discussion).

**Religion in the singular**

Parallel with this triangular construction of religions, students are also taught how scholars should relate to religion in the singular. Religion in the singular is the broad category into which all the different phenomena belong. Here the students are introduced to available and acceptable identity positions within the scholarly study of religion, and they are made aware what the proper and improper subjects for discussion are. These positions can also be discerned in other courses, for instance on sociology of religion, but here for the sake of available space, we will restrict us self to teaching in history of religion.

In these representations rather sharp separations are established between religion and non-religion, between object and researcher, and between empirical data, on the one hand, and their various interpretations on the other. But they vary with regards to
what status is attributed to these interpretations: whether scholars should be tolerant towards other possible interpretations, or whether these should be denied all together. Accordingly, these identity positions seek to different extent to clean or purify the spaces that they separate. We will here give two examples to illustrate this.

The first example is from an introductory lecture on the History of Religion. This example affirms the above mentioned conception of the study as a comparative endeavor with an analytical focus on textual sources. The teacher is here demarcating the limits of scholarly knowledge through a divide between sources and their interpretations:

The history of religion is the study of religion in all countries at all times. The historical [scholarly approach] consists in the fact that we study them on the basis of sources. We more or less use the same tools as in the discipline of History in general: we read the sources – we do not assume that the various religions are either true or false. It is a cool, matter of fact kind of observation in the sense that we study human beings. The truths of religions are a philosophical endeavor – it is not an issue for a historian. We can only talk about that which can be documented, we do not ask: did Cain really kill Abel? We can only ask about what people imagined about this at a certain time in history. A lot of texts mention gods or trolls or demons, but that is not for us to evaluate – that would be absurd. We are only concerned with texts and pictures about what people have actually said and done (Lecture Sept. 5, 2006).

Several things happen here. First of all the lecturer is linking the scholarly historical approach to things that are «matters of fact» (i.e. what people have actually said and done), to observation, to documentation, and to sources. This linkage can also be seen as designating one coherent space or the realm of scholarly enquiry. The researcher can access this space, and thus observe religion in an un-biased manner, through the use of scholarly and objective methods. Secondly, there are the matters which are not for the scholar to deal with, which is articulated as «the truth or false» of the religions. And this is set aside as «a philosophical endeavor» – and as something that from a scholarly perspective is «absurd» – clearly demarcating it from the empirical level which is the area for the scholar. This is in a sense a modest approach that knows its limitations as some things are for the scholar to know (the observable reality) and other things are up for other kinds of evaluation (the truth claims of the religions).

This demarcation of a level of empirical reality from a level of truth claims and interpretations is a very common practice in many areas of academia, and it opens a sphere for other (e.g. religious) interpretations of the data as legitimate, for instance regarding their moral implications or their origin, as long as this is not done within the academic sphere. The given approach is tolerant towards other interpretations than the scholarly as it recognizes the limits of its own range and scope. Or as a colleague of ours recently put it: it makes it possible for scholars with various religious backgrounds to co-exist at a department for the Study of Religion without constantly getting at each other’s throats! Nevertheless, at the same time it disguises that this modesty relies on an unacknowledged universalization of a specific ontology. This ontology structures reality by privileging sight and observability as a straightforward matter-of-fact process (Bloch 2008). Or in other words: it blurs the fact that where you draw the line
between facts and truth, between data and their interpretation is often a matter of contestation (Laclau and Mouffe 1990; Milbanks 1991).

The second example states some of the same positions regarding the separation between religion and academia, but in a slightly sharper tone. The following is an extract from the very first lecture for the first year students, and the teacher has spoken at some length about the different religions with which the student should be acquainted. The teacher then continues with a presentation of the history of the study itself:

Later, next semester, you will learn how brave men and women broke the monopoly of Theology. We are here placed within a tradition of the breakthrough of natural sciences, where it became acknowledged that it is possible to study religion on a scientific ground. Theology has as its prime task to reflect upon Christianity and by this they produce religion…and then they reflect upon that (laughter)…Theology at the universities are mainly a service for the Church whereas the science of religion is autonomous and only obligated towards science. Truth is not something that we discuss in these lessons. We can talk about facts or data – but we cannot say anything definite about their interpretation. This does not, however, mean that everything flows, but we are on shaky ground as soon as we are dealing with the level of interpretation. (The teacher writes on the black board: ‘facts’ >‘truths’) We know what we are talking about because we talk on the basis of material sources, on the basis of something real. So the only thing I will not accept is that this academic axiom is violated: we are not to discuss whether God exists – that is a matter for the lunch break…well, I will not discuss it in the lunch break either (laughter) (Lecture, Sept. 12, 2006).

In this lecture, ‘religion’ and ‘the scholarly study of religion’ are contrasted more directly and mutually impose meaning upon each other. Besides the mild ridicule of Theology (not uncommon within the departments for the Study of Religion in Denmark), the boundary between the scholarly study of religion and religion (and their respective spheres of authority) is stated explicitly: Initially the subject, i.e., the Study of Religion, is established as a scientific study through a defining separation from religion represented by Theology. Then the independence of the scholarly approach vis-à-vis the domain of religion is affirmed, while the space of Theology, through its link to the Lutheran state church in Denmark, is presented as academically compromised. This representation of the scholarly study of religion as unbiased/objective downplays the fact that the disciplines of the Humanities, such as history, are, to a large extent, hermeneutic traditions and thereby already involved in interpretative endeavours. It also downplays that the departments for the Study of Religion – as many at the Faculty of Humanities in Denmark – have a similar structural link towards the public high schools in Denmark, as they prepare students for teaching the subject of religion. In the subsequent sentences, however, rather solid restrictions on the academic sphere (what you can and cannot do) become apparent, but they are not articulated as restrictions – probably because they are not conceived as coming from outside the academic sphere. Internal rules and restrictions are thus a part of the ‘we’ into which the students are socialised.

In the quote we are presented with a number of the same divides as in the previously quoted lecture. These divides interact and legitimate the authority and limits of the cat-
egories: the scholarly study of religion – religion, facts – truths, data – interpretation, and material sources – (the opposition is not stated in the quote). Again we are presented with the notion of an empirical reality accessible to all through the sources, and this reality is opposed to the sphere of the religious truth claims, thus limiting the scope of the scholars’ work to the first sphere. The second part – exemplified by the existence of God – is expelled to the lunch break, and then, after a short pause, denied altogether. Partly due to the more sarcastic and humorous style of the teacher, the divide affirms the authority and reasonability of the scholar even more explicitly: 1. we know what we are talking about, and 2. you can believe what you want – as long as you accept that what you do is exactly that: believing and not knowing. It should be noticed that such sharp distinctions separating the realm of scholarly work (facts, data, materiality, objectivity, un-restrictedness) from religion (truths, interpretations, trans-empirics, subjectivity, restrictedness/bias) are promoted more systematically by some teachers than by others. Further, there are also situations where such sharp distinctions are challenged, reconfigured or subverted. This is for example the case when the Study of Religion is related to issues of power and knowledge, or when the emerging study is contextualized as part of colonialism. However, this is mainly the case when teachers are discussing methodological issues, or when the students are taught to be self-reflective. Whenever the object of observation is religion as such, these distinctions seem quite persistently to impose themselves on the observed material.

Negotiating the object

In both examples the category of religion in the singular is constructed through a sharp separation from, and contrast to, the academic realm – a juxtaposition that, just as the triangles, creates an inside and an outside. The researcher is thus placed on the outside while the object resides on the inside and through this rhetoric a clear-cut distinction and thus distance between researcher and object is established. This distance is enforced by the extended use of visual metaphors as the proper way to conceptualize the research process, such as: let us take a look at, focus on, gain insights into, in this perspective and so on (see also Jay 1993 for discussion). Sight as a basic metaphor for doing research (and not for example to touch, hear, experience, or feel) necessarily invokes a notion of distance as a derived metaphor for the difference between researcher and object. Because you need distance to see – otherwise you would get the object in the eye, so to speak. Although some difference between researcher and object might be a necessary prerequisite for any analytical observation (since a complete continuity between researcher and object would imply the mutual dissolving of both positions), we suggest that the combination of the sharp separations and the triangular formation of religions produce an oversimplification of the researchers relationship towards the object of study. The simplification makes the distance appear as ontologically given and thus unproblematic. This blurs the fact that other ideals for the academic practice continuously persists, sometimes creating a paradox: simultaneously with the ideal of distance and difference, many scholars of religion maintain an ideal
of proximity, understanding and sympathetic insight towards the object. The goal of the scholar is thus partly to represent the world as lived and experienced by the object – an ideal that to a certain degree demands the use and understanding of the same categories as the object of study\(^5\). The contradictory ideals of nearness and distance are illustratively reflected in the following sentence from one of the introductory textbooks used at the courses:

The historian of religion or the sociologist of religion tries to get as close as possible to the object of study. The scholarly point of departure is relentlessly that it is possible to understand a religion even though you do not believe its preaching or share its world view. Obviously, the religious expressions can be very different from the concepts about the world with which the scholar is personally confidential. However, because we are studying human beings when working with religion, there nevertheless exists a fundamental common denominator, which makes understanding and interpretation possible: the scholar is a human being exactly as the people he or she is studying, regardless of time and place. This does not mean that the religions can be understood by the scholar as they are perceived by the believers, but merely that the external observer through his work with the sources of religion can obtain an insight which is meaningful in an academic context. In other words it is self-evident that the concepts of religion used in academia and the scholarly interest in religion are different from those of the believers (Rothstein 1997:16–17, translated by the authors).

In this comprised statement about how a scholar of religion ideally is supposed to relate to the object of study, we can observe the somewhat paradoxical back-and-forth movement between closeness/continuity and distance/difference, which makes up the space in which the scholarly practice takes place. In spite of what is suggested in the given examples, the analytical distance needed in order to uphold the objectification of the object is never set once and for all. It is negotiated whenever the researcher is engaging with the object. Such negotiations are all too well known by researchers doing fieldwork or interviews as an intrinsic part of academic practice. Sometimes, the researcher experiences that the distance gets too short, which potentially makes it difficult to sustain the categorical tension necessary to uphold the objectification – what we could term a categorical collapse or lack of objectivation. At other times the distance becomes too large, which potentially makes it difficult for the researcher to grasp the use of the categories as employed by the object «itself». The scholar here experiences an inadequacy of the analytical tools which is at her/his disposition. We term this categorical incompatibility\(^6\). Both types of experience prompts a process of negotiation where the researcher seeks to re-establish his or her position towards the object of study. In the following we will give some brief examples of both types of «mal-distance» and discuss their implications before returning to some concluding remarks.

Categorical collapse

Recently, some colleagues of ours have expressed frustrations: when approaching their object of study in face to face research situations, e.g. when making interviews and doing field work, it seemed to be difficult to grasp or «see» the object. This was
described as the experience that the object of study slipped away and seemed to evade the notion of religion as a specific identifiable category, a notion otherwise implied in the researcher’s questions. Further, by using the same kind of language and terminology as the researcher, the object of study, was constantly escaping the position as object. This kind of frustration was, for instance, articulated by a colleague, who works with Muslim minorities. She expressed that she has had the recurring feeling that informants were not telling her what they were actually experiencing. They would use wording such as «...on the one side I think / one the other side I think...» and «It depends on...what do you mean by...?» and «...that depends on the context ...» and «In relation to what...?'». At first, she interpreted this type of answers and wording as a shield or a façade, used by the informants to hide their actual meanings and attitudes about religion. That is, they used a language filled with reservations and flexibility in order to evade talking about their religion. Consequently, she intuitively categorized them as difficult informants. Later it occurred to her that this type of wording might reflect the informants’ actual experiences: that it should be seen as a genuine expression of religious identity, where using modalities of negotiation and contextualization were how they established meaning in their lives.

We would like to suggest that this frustration, among other things, is related to the fact that the realm of the scholar/academia is often characterized by a certain language of interpretation, flexibility and cautiousness, which favors a focus on process and contextualization. And conversely: the language of the object is often supposed to be that of essence, certainty and substance. It is among other things these differences in language use that uphold the boundary between scholar and object. The informants here employed a type of discourse very similar to the language of the scholar, and by doing so the demarcation of the object was challenged. In such situations the categories of the scholar and the object momentarily collapses into one horizon of meaning. The researcher here experienced this collapse as frustrating and it made it necessary for the researcher to reevaluate her position. In the example given, the researcher at first maintained her expectations as to what could constitute a genuine expression from the object, therefore deeming the informants «difficult». Subsequently she modified her position in order to objectify the informant’s narrative yet again by asking different research questions. Instead of expecting the informants to express what for her would count as a clear statement about Islam and being Muslim – an expectation that produced the search for ‘an actual meaning’ behind the words – she accepted the informants’ narrative as a possible valid expression of religion. The consequence of this shift in perspective was that the researcher re-negotiated the necessary distance between researcher and object, and by doing so she annulled the categorical collapse.

Categorical incompatibility
At other times the researcher experiences situations where the scholarly categories employed somehow seem too far away from the object of study. In these situations, the distance between the researcher and object moves beyond the useful and needed objec-
tivation and towards a distortion that it potentially obscuring and/or that makes one lose track of the sympathetic insight into the object.

A colleague of ours working with everyday Muslim practices and identities, voiced the experience that his theoretical and conceptual framework for analysis was somewhat inadequate when approaching the object of study. He explained that when interviewing about everyday religious practices, he had difficulties with issues of whether the informants could at all be seen as Muslims or even religious, even though the informants self-identified as such. One of the reasons for this difficulty was that the informants did not participate in any ritual practices like prayer or observance of fast, and they did not visit the mosque. Neither did they appear to have any knowledge about the Qur'an and the Islamic traditions, about difference schools of law within Islam, or central dogmatic tenets. Educated as an historian of religion with, among other things, the triangular concept of religion, he had certain expectations to how a religion, in this case Islam, ought to appear: that people engage in certain practices and communities associated with transcendence and distinct beliefs. This conceptualization made him ask questions which implied religion as something distinctly identifiable to him as well as to the informants. Consequently, the informants’ lack of ritual practice, lack of knowledge of central dogmas and texts, and lack of engagement in some sort of institutional religious community created a frustration that the informants did not fit his analytical categories of religion. And this prompted him to reevaluate and reconfigure his analytical conception of religion to better match the empirical reality he was facing. It meant, among other things, that the mere sense of belonging and self-identification was put into forefront of the category of religion, and by doing so he of course had to deal with a range of methodological issues of how to grasp the informants own use of the terms; to what extent the categories religion and Islam were at all meaningful to them; what weight he should give the informants account compared to his own second order research categories and so on. In this example the researcher sought to resolve the categorical predicament by moving closer to the objects categories, thereby re-establishing a framed continuity between researcher and object.

Both of the examples given here are about researchers studying Islam and Muslims, and this framing of the interaction with the object as being about Islam might of course strengthens the scholars’ expectation of the informants to behave coherent according to the prototypical scientific category of religion. We suggest that this is in part due to the fact that Islam is perceived as one of the classical world religions in the scholarly discourse as a natural example of the triangular notion of ‘a religion’ (see also Masuzawa 2005 for discussions about the notion of world religions). We argue that this perspective on religion that depends on sharp boundaries is not apt to grasp the complexity of the processes by which our object of study comes into being.

Conclusion
The experiences of the evasive, the unclear, the fluctuating or the messy character of scientific practices and the negotiations of categories that this implies are well known
and well experienced by most scholars. They are frustrating, they prompt discussions, and sometimes also allegations towards other scholars as being for example ethnocentric, Eurocentric, Christianocentric or orientalist (variations of categorical incompatibility) or biased, normative or «gone native» (variations of categorical collapse). They potentially place the scholar in a continuous suspense between a longing for the complete access to the object and the longing for a pure, distanced and separate scholarly realm. In this sense, these experiences of negotiations are also fruitful because they drive the process of research and scholarly discussion forward. However, in this article we have argued that the negotiated character of this relationship between scholar and object is obscured or hidden by conceptualisations of religion that are dependent on sharp and rigid boundaries between religion and the scholarly study of religion and consequently between object and researcher. The negotiation is also obscured by the discourse on an empirical reality which is directly and un-problematically observable to the detached scholar of religion. The initial promotion of a clear and given relationship between object and researcher potentially clashes with the experienced research practice later on. The use of rather uniform or clear-cut categories in the teachings might, as mentioned, be due to didactical considerations in teaching first year courses. And distinctions are, as already mentioned, necessary in order to set the reflection and communication in motion. However the clear-cut category of religion as unproblematically separated from an equally clear-cut category of academia seems to prevail as the education proceeds. Thus, the consequence is that the gradual building up of sensitivity towards the complex and provisional character of the categories we use as scholars (which is an essential part of academic skills in the Humanities and social sciences) is not to the same extent followed through when it comes to the way the category religion is shaped and used.

Notes

1 This article is equally co-authored by the two authors. The empirical observations on which part of the argument of this article is based, were carried out as part of Birgitte S. Johansen’s Ph.d.-project Adskillelsens logik: sekulære kategoriseringer af religion i akademisk praksis (2010). The main data collection for the Ph.d.-project was conducted by Johansen, and consisted of interviews with staff and students, the texts used in teaching, and participant observations during class at Aarhus and Copenhagen University. Jeldtoft assisted in the data collection process by conducting participant observation at Copenhagen University. Johansen’s Ph.d. thesis was defended in September 2010.


3 In the following where we quote from notes on oral performances, the reader should of course be aware of the transformation of speech into text. In the transcription we have chosen to downplay the specific features of speech such as pauses, self-interruption and the like and prioritized a more coherent presentation. This because the direct transcription does not
sufficiently acknowledge the actual very coherent and thorough performance from the teachers which we experienced.

4 This approach is a standard within many branches of the study of religion, often termed ‘methodological atheism’ or ‘methodological agnosticism’ (see Porpora 2006 for a thorough discussion).

5 This demand is, among other places, voiced by W.C. Smith (1963): that the object should be able to recognize and accept the work of the scholar. How this should be done in practice, since the object seldom speaks with one, coherent voice, remains an open question in Smith’s work. See also Asad 2001.

6 Some of these issues are also reflected in the long standing discussions of the insider – outsider question in the study of religion (McCutcheon 1997 for an overview). The point here, however, is that the very notion of insider versus outsider is dependent on a given objectification of the object that produces the boundary that separates the inside from the outside. The boundary might sometimes appear self-evident and naturally given, but often it reveals its negotiated character in the research process.

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