The Collective Ownership of Knowledge:
Implications for the Study of Religion/s in Local Contexts[1]

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ABSTRACT

The 2021 Conference of the British Association for the Study of Religions coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of a degree programme in Religious Studies in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. After tracing developments in the Edinburgh Religious Studies course, which gradually witnessed a move away from a model based on the world religions paradigm towards emphasising the centrality of teaching about and conducting research on religions in local contexts, this paper argues that discerning future directions in the study of religion/s must begin by examining critically the aims and uses of extracting knowledge from localised communities. The traditional phenomenological aim of Religious Studies was to foster understanding of religious traditions by suspending temporarily the researcher's pre-formed academic judgements, employing an empathetic approach and then creating structures or typologies for comparative purposes. This method, which was based on the notion that knowledge produces enlightenment, came under severe criticism during the latter part of the twentieth century. Alternative interpretations of knowledge were developed, particularly knowledge as power, which analysed the way knowledge is obtained and how it is used by those in positions of authority. A further stage in research is now emerging that conceives knowledge as collective communal property, thus challenging the pervasive academic assumption that knowledge of local religious traditions is freely accessible to anyone choosing to investigate it. By adopting the concept 'relational research', the author argues that fundamental methodological, pedagogical and ethical innovations in contemporary approaches to the academic study of religion/s will result.

Keywords: world religions, ownership, knowledge, locality, agency, religious studies, relationality, power

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The 2021 Conference of the British Association for the Study of Religions coincided with the occasions of the 175th anniversary of the founding in 1846 in Edinburgh of New College as the Theological College of the Free Church of Scotland and the establishment 125 years later in 1971of the Religious Studies degree in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. In this article, after briefly reviewing developments in the Religious Studies programme in Edinburgh, I present my vision for what the title of 2021 BASR conference described as 'disciplinary futures' for the study of religion/s in the twenty-first century.

The degree in Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh was not the first such degree programme in Scotland. One year earlier, in 1970, Andrew Walls founded the first Religious Studies Department in Scotland in the University of Aberdeen. Walls, who had been appointed as lecturer in Church History in the Faculty of Divinity in Aberdeen in 1966, situated the new Religious Studies course in the Faculty of Arts, although it was possible for PhD students to be awarded their degrees either in Arts or Divinity. Walls had lectured previously at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone and at the University of Nsukka in Nigeria. By comparison with his African experience, he was frustrated with the traditional approach to teaching Church History in Western universities, which he regarded as highly Eurocentric almost totally ignoring the fast growing and radical transformation of Christianity occurring in Africa and in other parts of the non-Western world (Walls, 2000, 107). In the mid-1970s, the newly founded Department of Religious Studies, under Walls's direction, initiated the study of what it called 'Primal Religions' by introducing a one-year taught master's programme: 'The M.Litt. in Religion in Primal Societies'. The aim of the course was described as providing instruments for the study of the 'primal' (or 'ethnic' or 'traditional') religions characteristic of many societies in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania, the effects on belief systems, practices and religious institutions of the meeting of these religions with 'universal' religions (notably Christianity and Islam), and the new religious movements arising after contact with Western influences (Taylor, 1976, 128). After taking up his post in Aberdeen, Walls became an active member of the British Association for the History of Religions (BAHR, the predecessor of the BASR) becoming its President in 1977. His impact was felt immediately at the 1978 Conference of the BAHR, which convened under the theme, 'The Understanding of Mission in the Study of Religion' (Cox, 2006, 153). In 1982, Walls founded the postgraduate research project in the University of Aberdeen he called the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World. He described the Centre as having been founded on the conviction 'that the churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific are now central to the Christian faith, and lie at the heart of most questions about the present and future of Christianity' (Walls, 1983, 10-11). The relevance of the Aberdeen context for Edinburgh will soon become clear.

Religious Studies at Edinburgh developed originally not within the Faculty of Divinity at New College, but as an idea put forward by W. Montgomery Watt, Professor in the School of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. Watt noted in a memorandum dated October 1968 and addressed to the University Senatus that 'there is a gap in the present teaching of the Faculty of Arts in respect of the study of religion from a scientific, factual or neutral standpoint' (Cox and Sutcliffe, 2006, 14). In a separate proposal from the Faculty of Divinity dated 15 October 1968, it was argued that the 'Faculty of Divinity, as professionally and traditionally most deeply involved with the subject of religion … would welcome an opportunity to explore the content of the

common area of study and ways of compounding the variety of approaches and interests into a single degree structure' (Cox and Sutcliffe, 2006, 14). The initial proposal from the Faculty of Divinity was dominated by Christian themes, including 'Biblical Studies, Church History, Christian Dogmatics … and Christian Ethics'. No mention was made of any 'world religion', although studies in Sanskrit and Arabic were included (Cox and Sutcliffe, 2006, 15). In February 1969, the Dean of the Faculty of Divinity, Professor John McIntyre, presented a proposal for the new degree M.A. (Religious Studies), which would be divided into four major themes: 1) Biblical Studies, including languages Hebrew and Greek, and options for the study of Arabic and Sanskrit; 2) History, including Ecclesiastical History, British and European History, African History, Archaeology, and History of Science; 3) Theology, Ethics and Philosophy; 4) Christian Education, Pastoral Care, Church in Society and other social sciences (Cox and Sutcliffe, 2006, 15). In 1971, the programme had its first intake of four students in the three-year BA (RS). In 1973 this was expanded into a four-year MA (Honours) degree in Religious Studies. The MA degree took the study of religion out of its Christocentric orientation to include the study of world religions and methodologies. The religions to be studied included Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto and African Religions. Methodology classes would draw on foundation courses offered in other parts of the University during the first two years, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and history. Judaism and Christianity would be taught from staff in the Faculty of Divinity, whereas lecturers from other areas of the University would teach world religions, largely drawn from Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Asian Studies and African Studies (Cox and Sutcliffe, 2006, 15). In 1973, Frank Whaling was appointed to the staff of the Faculty of Divinity to coordinate the new BA and MA Honours in Religious Studies. In its initial stage, therefore, it would be fair to conclude that the study of religions went beyond the study of Christianity and Christian theology by focusing primarily on the study of 'world religions'.

The scope for the study of religions in Edinburgh was broadened when in 1987 Andrew Walls moved the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World from Aberdeen to the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh. Although the Centre primarily was a teaching and research institute for postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers, it had an impact on the undergraduate programme by introducing for the first time into the curriculum a section on 'Primal Religions' and also by making non-Western students a visible part of the overall New College community. In 1988, Alistair Kee and Nick Wyatt transferred from Glasgow to Edinburgh, expanding the range of the degree offerings and, alongside the influence of Walls's Centre, redirecting the curriculum to the study of Christianity and other religious traditions of the world in contemporary global contexts. In 1995, this emphasis was to receive formal Faculty of Divinity approval with the establishment of a major journal located in the Faculty, *Studies in World Christianity: The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion*, published by Edinburgh University Press.

During the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, Religious Studies in Edinburgh was involved in the larger re-structuring of the Faculty of Divinity into a School of Divinity. Departments were eliminated in favour of Subject Areas. New appointments were made in Religious Studies. On Frank Whaling's retirement in 1999, I joined Religious Studies as Head of the Subject Area working with Alistair Kee and Nick Wyatt. I was soon joined by Jeanne Openshaw and Elizabeth Koepping, both

anthropologists, with Jeanne's work centred in West Bengal and Elizabeth's in Borneo. The re-structuring of the University meant that more course offerings in Religious Studies than ever before were situated in the School of Divinity. I taught courses in theory and method in the study of religion and in the area we called Indigenous Religions (formerly Primal Religions) with a focus on specialised topics, such as 'Shamanism', local religious expressions in Africa and the history of the academic study of Indigenous Religions. Jeanne and Elizabeth offered courses based on their knowledge of local societies in the regions of their research. In 2005, Steven Sutcliffe, who had done extensive work on New Age movements in contemporary society, was appointed Lecturer in Religion and Society and was followed shortly by Hannah Holtschneider in Modern Judaism and Christian Lange in Islamic History and contemporary Islamic movements. At the same time, Afe Adogame was appointed to a post as Lecturer in the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World with a specialisation in contemporary religious movements in Africa and in the African diaspora. Afe contributed significantly to the teaching and research programme in Religious Studies. Jack Thompson, who was also located in the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, participated in sections of courses at postgraduate level based on his long experience in Malawi. Later, Arkotong Longkumer, who had done his PhD under Jeanne Openshaw on a local religious movement in Nagaland, joined Religious Studies and developed courses on specialised topics, such as Religion and Nationalism. Shortly afterwards, Naomi Appleton was appointed to the Religious Studies Subject Area as Lecturer with a particular expertise in contemporary Buddhism.

Although I cannot go into further detail on later appointments following my retirement in 2011, I believe I am correct in suggesting that the direction within the Religious Studies Subject Area in Edinburgh has continued its move away from teaching religions according to the 'world religions paradigm' to present the study of religion/s in local contexts and their interaction with global influences. This conclusion is in part confirmed by the important book, edited by two of our former students, Chris Cotter and David Robertson (initiators of the now globally recognised Religious Studies Project), entitled *After World Religions* in which various scholars discuss new directions in the study of religions that push us beyond the old static models based on the essentialised concept 'world religions' (Cotter and Robertson, 2016).

Future Directions in the Academic Study of Religion/s: Local Agency and the Ownership of Knowledge

With this brief review of Religious Studies in Edinburgh, which exemplifies a movement that gradually came to emphasise the central place of locality in the study of religions, I want to offer my own interpretation of how future research into religious communities can take place based on issues emerging from the acknowledgement of local agency and questions about the ownership of knowledge. My interest in this topic developed gradually after I began teaching the phenomenology of religion in the University of Zimbabwe in 1989. I used as one of the texts the landmark book by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of* Religion, in which Smith offered a critique of the concept 'religion' by tracing its historical development in modernity from its original meaning as 'faith' or 'piety' to a reified entity that can be described in terms of beliefs and practices applicable everywhere (Smith,1964). Smith's rejection of the category 'religion'

has been pursued more recently by Timothy Fitzgerald in his important book *The Ideology of Religious* Studies (2000), in which he argues that because of its close association with theology, the term religion should be replaced in academic studies by culture. Fitzgerald's argument led me to suggest that religion is best defined, following the suggestion of the American scholar of religion Walter Capps (1995, 1), in terms of its sine qua non, that without which religion is not religion. Based in part on the work of the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000), I have contended in numerous writings that the necessary conditions for religion to be present include an identifiable community (even if it is only implicitly acknowledged and experienced individually, as in new age, transient groups), an authoritative tradition (even if the tradition is largely invented, as in neo-shamanic organisations where shamanism is claimed to represent the most ancient and universal expression of human religious experience), and the transmission of an authoritative tradition from generation to generation (even if the transmission is primarily alleged, as in some Indigenous traditions that trace their identity to an autochthonous ancestor) (Cox, 2019, 331-48; Cox, 2022, 97-108). On my interpretation, religion is not associated with a theological concept, such as 'the sacred' (Eliade) or 'the holy' (Otto) but can only be understood in its embodiment among living communities and as it is expressed in observable practices. For the academic researcher, this leads naturally to consider the fundamental question: 'Who owns knowledge?'

In line with W.C. Smith and developing out of my dialogue with Timothy Fitzgerald, I explored this question in different ways during my research in Central Australia beginning in 2011 facilitated by colleagues at Western Sydney University and at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs. The beginning point can be found in the recognition that what traditionally academics have regarded as the 'subjects' (or 'objects') of their research actually play an active part in how they are investigated, and consequently have a right to participate in what is said about them, to engage with researchers on how information is obtained from them, and to be consulted on how the findings of a research project are disseminated.

These emphases in the study of religion/s become particularly evident when we consider the case of research on Indigenous communities. For example, the anthropologist Marcia Langton of Melbourne University claims that Indigenous societies traditionally have been reified, or turned into 'things', by academic researchers. Langton, herself an Indigenous Australian, argues that the most important innovation introduced by current approaches in Indigenous Studies is 'its restitution of the agency of Indigenous people' through which the scholar brings 'the voice of the Indigenous protagonists into their own history' and explains 'events by reference to the perspectives and theories that they themselves exerted on their affairs' (Langton, 2012, 173). This leads to Langton's conclusion that the 'greatest contribution of Indigenous studies as a field of scholarly endeavour has been to reinstate those people who were once simple subjects as people with agency' (Langton, 2012, 173).

A similar conclusion has been made by a group of researchers that participated in a study funded by the Social Science Medicine Africa Network (Soma-net) in Kenya between 2003 and 2006. The aim of the project was to provide education on the

prevention of AIDS among school pupils in a region south of Nairobi. After its conclusion in 2006, the researchers built on the Soma-net project by using what they call 'participatory and dialogic approaches' to help members of the local community reach consensus on practical issues that confront them, the most recent of which has been a tree-planting exercise aimed at restoring ecologically damaged land (Ahlberg et al., 2016, 258). After encountering numerous problems caused by a multifaceted set of cultural and gender issues in the initial research project, factors not immediately apparent to outside donors, the researchers adopted a method called 'communicative action', an approach, they explain, that 'allows participants to consciously and deliberately reach intersubjective agreement as the basis for mutual understanding about what to do in their particular practical situation' (Ahlberg et al., 2016, 259). These aims clearly are consistent with Marcia Langton's call to acknowledge that the adherents themselves, who form the subject matter of religious studies, possess 'agency'. Both Langton and the Soma-net team depict local communities as active participants in research projects rather than passive 'objects' that can be studied as if they are impersonal non-organic 'things'.

J. A. Barnes and Types of Knowledge

Relevant to this discussion is the analysis of types of knowledge developed by the social anthropologist, J. A. Barnes. Barnes divided knowledge into three types with differing purposes: 1) Knowledge as enlightenment; 2) Knowledge as power; 3) Knowledge as property. In his book entitled *Who Should Know What?* (1979), he argued that the twentieth century witnessed a shift away from how knowledge had been understood previously as a source of enlightenment to knowledge perceived as power. He explains that, under the new circumstances, knowledge is 'seen as a source of power to be used by those who control it for their own advantage rather than for the enlightenment and benefit of mankind' (Barnes, 1979, 64). He then suggests that more recently, particularly among communities in the Third World and minority groups, knowledge has been conceived as property in which it is 'regarded as … an asset possessed by an individual or a group which may be treasured but is not intended for use and which is available for sale or gift only under restrictive conditions, if at all' (Barnes, 1979, 64).

In a later book, Barnes (1990, 210) argued that social sciences developed in the late eighteenth century when 'ethnographic information was perceived by those who first started to collect it as a source of enlightenment'. In the nineteenth century, knowledge, particularly of the 'lower classes and dependent peoples', was sought because the ruling elite believed the lower classes could not articulate their needs for themselves (Barnes 1990, 210). This led during the early part of the twentieth century towards a use of knowledge as beneficent power whereby 'the knowledge gained by empirical inquiry was seen as a means for discovering how to change people's lives', usually for the better, for example, by teaching them how to build latrines, avoid alcohol or to 'stop beating their wives' (Barnes, 1990, 210). Barnes then suggests that after 1945 more and more people who had been the subject of ethnographic research simply refused to cooperate by withholding the information sought by outside researchers. This indicates a change in which the subjects of research began to treat knowledge of their own societies as their own private property.

Barnes's outline of the three types of knowledge is particularly important for understanding contemporary repatriation movements occurring among Indigenous communities globally. Barnes (1979, 65) refers to holdings in museums of objects that once belonged to Indigenous peoples as 'cultural trophies', the acquisition of which was justified 'by reference to the universal values of science'. He explains: 'The argument is, or was, that we are not impoverishing the Lapps or the Bushmen by displaying their artefacts in our museums', but 'we are doing all mankind a service by rescuing them from destruction' (Barnes, 1979, 65). The justification for removing artefacts from their original owners and placing them in museums is based on the concept of knowledge as enlightenment, in which 'works of art and representative material objects, like knowledge itself, are sources of enlightenment' (Barnes, 1979, 65). The same objects represent knowledge as power and ownership, both for Indigenous peoples and for those who removed them from their traditional owners. The power to interpret the artefacts, control their use and convey their meanings to future generations traditionally resided with Indigenous communities. Removing these objects from Indigenous groups and displaying them in museums and exhibitions required an audacious exercise of power, usurped their original intentions and made them subject to outside interpretations, but what is even more significant, it violated the legitimate right to ownership of the objects by Indigenous peoples themselves.

The return of ancient artefacts does not imply that knowledge of their pre-colonial meanings and uses is understood in contemporary circumstances by Indigenous communities. Originally, such artefacts conveyed to Indigenous people knowledge of their traditions and time-honoured patterns of life and, frequently, played a critical function in ritual re-enactments of sacred stories and foundational myths. Knowledge, in this customary context, belonged to or was the communal property of its original owners. That it was extracted from them for purposes of enlightening the world or for purposes of scientific research does not obviate the fact that it was taken from Indigenous communities, often without their consent, and appropriated by means of superior power by those who had no legitimate claim to it.

We can conclude, therefore, that current repatriation projects among Indigenous communities have more to do with a broad interpretation of cultural heritage than is implied strictly by reference to material objects. Repatriation includes the meaning of the ancestral remains and the secret-sacred objects associated with them, much of which was retained in the memory of communities through oral traditions, songs and ritual performances. In many cases around the world, the memory on which the meaning of repatriated objects depends has been lost or seriously disrupted by forces of modernity, including colonial oppression, missionary activities, Western education, global economic structures, rapidly advancing communication systems and urbanization.

Perspectives from Archaeology and Heritage Studies: The Case of the Ngadjuri of South Australia

Issues arising from the repatriation of knowledge have been addressed recently from the perspectives of Archaeology and Heritage Studies. An important book, edited by V. Apaydin of the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, entitled *Shared Knowledge, Shared Power* (2018), explores new theories and methods in the study of human communities based on revised understandings of intellectual property rights.

Chapter Two, written by Claire Smith, an archaeological anthropologist at Flinders University, in Adelaide, Australia, her colleague at Flinders, Gary Jackson, and Vincent Copley Sr, Chair of the Ngadjuri Elders Heritage and Landcare Council, suggests a method for reformulating approaches to Indigenous Knowledge under the intriguing title, 'Intellectual Soup' (Smith, Copley Sr and Jackson, 2018, 9-28; see also, Cox, 2022, 222-24).

Smith, Copley and Jackson introduce their chapter by referring to the relationship of Copley's grandfather, the Ngadjuri Elder Barney Warria, with the well-known Australian anthropologist Ronald Berndt, who died in 1990. When he was a young researcher, between 1939 and 1944, Berndt worked closely with Warria compiling detailed field notes describing Ngadjuri culture, traditions, genealogies and ceremonies (Nicholas and Smith, 2020, 149). The Ngadjuri, who traditionally inhabited an area located in the mid-north region of South Australia, were among the earliest Indigenous populations in Australia to be colonized due to the arable land they inhabited. After Berndt's death, a thirty-year embargo was placed on access to Berndt's field notes by his widow and co-researcher, Catherine Berndt, who died four years after her husband. Vincent Copley contends that much of the cultural knowledge that was contained in Ronald Berndt's field notes had been lost to or forgotten by the present generation. The data compiled by Berndt was needed in the early 1990s, not only to support cultural renewal projects, but to supply information based on genealogical charts relevant to land claims that were being adjudicated with the Australian government (Smith, Copley Sr and Jackson, 2018, 9).

Smith, Copley and Jackson (2018, 10) argue that Catherine Berndt imposed the embargo on her husband's early field notes because 'she felt that the material might be used by government agencies to damage Aboriginal causes'. They suggest that her fears may have been justified because the Mabo decision overturning the legal doctrine that Australian land belonged to no one prior to British colonization (*terra nullius*) was not imposed by the Australian courts until 1992 (Brennan, 1993, 22-23). A further reason confirming Catherine Berndt's distrust of how her husband's field notes would be used, according to Smith, Copley and Jackson (2018, 10), was based on the commonly maintained Western understanding that intellectual property rights belong to individuals and primarily reflect commercial interests. Little attention would have been given to the rights of communities with respect to knowledge that they possessed and which they had shared with academic researchers. Finally, the Berndts knew that it was widely held by academics and government representatives that the Ngadjuri people had disappeared from their original homelands by the early twentieth century and had been absorbed into the urban population of Adelaide, thereby excusing any interested parties from entering into negotiations with their descendants on the use of Ngadjuri land and the appropriation of Indigenous cultural knowledge (Smith, Copley Sr. and Jackson, 2018, 11).

George Nicholas and Claire Smith explain that the embargo on Berndt's field notes, which was included as a clause in Catherine Berndt's will, is currently being enforced by the University of Western Australia, which houses the notes in the University's Berndt Museum. Nicholas and Smith (2020, 149) call maintaining the embargo by a major Australian academic institution a denigration of 'the rights of Indigenous people'. Ngadjuri Elders have attempted to gain access to the field notes for nearly thirty years arguing that, in the words of Nicholas and Smith (2020, 149), 'there is no legal basis for the current embargo' as the field notes were rightfully the shared intellectual property of Ronald Berndt and Barney Warria. Vincent Copley has made the case that the

knowledge Warria conveyed to Berndt was recorded 'verbatim' by Berndt (Nicholas and Smith, 2020, 150). He argues that this confirms his contention that the field notes were shared property, Warria providing the details of Ngadjuri culture while Berndt recorded the knowledge that Warria conveyed to him. According to Nicholas and Smith (2020, 150), Western Australia University has consistently rejected Ngadjuri Elders' requests to consult Berndt's material and will continue do so until 2024, according to Catherine Berndt's stated wishes. The thirty-year ban on Berndt's notes imposed by his wife for interests aimed at protecting Aboriginal rights and traditional knowledge, as Nicholas and Smith (2020: 149-50) confirm, in effect obstructed efforts by Ngadjuri Elders to regain knowledge of their ancient cultural traditions and inhibited them from making a case for the return of their original homelands. Smith, Copley and Jackson use the case of the embargo on Berndt's interviews with Copley's grandfather to raise fundamental issues related to communal intellectual property and its relation to academic research. They explain:

> Controversies over cultural and intellectual property have emerged in the form of questions over ownership or access to the results of research and the many claims that descendant communities (including Indigenous peoples) and others make on cultural knowledge and information…. Concerns about claims to the ownership and use of cultural and intellectual property rights are rapidly emerging in all research disciplines and in many policy contexts, as the economic, scientific and cultural uses and values of traditional and Indigenous knowledge demand mounting attention.

Repatriation, Ownership and Dissemination of Knowledge: The Analogy of 'Intellectual Soup'

Using the analogy of preparing soup, Smith, Copley and Jackson outline the various ingredients and stages when an 'intellectual' soup is concocted by a group of interested cooks. In the case of research into local communities, as demonstrated in the example of Berndt and Warria, at least two cooks are required: 'one to provide the essential ingredients of Aboriginal knowledge (Barney Warria) and the other (Ronald Berndt) to provide essential ingredients relating to the method of production and the tastes of intended consumers' (Smith, Copley Sr and Jackson, 2018, 15). The ingredients used in making the intellectual soup also suggest two essential elements: Indigenous knowledge and theoretical frameworks. The recipe that is followed is largely developed by academics, but Indigenous people can use their own knowledge to alter the recipe. The kitchen and the cooking implements reflect practical instruments: the research environment, including the context in which the research is envisaged (usually universities) and the local environment where the data is collected and recorded, which is determined by the community being studied. The consumers of the soup, those interested in and affected by the results of the research, include the scholarly community, the general public, and sometimes governmental policy makers and commercial agents. Once the intellectual soup is completed and ready to be consumed, the final and most important question is asked: 'Who owns the soup'?

The analogy of an intellectual soup implies that the product of the collaborative effort between the researcher and the community being researched leads to the conclusion that both can claim equal rights of ownership in every aspect of its preparation and serving. This means that the knowledge acquired from research, including the analysis

and dissemination of findings that researchers often guard as comprising their academic freedom, must be repatriated to the community that supplied the information in the first place. This is because knowledge that was obtained from past generations can play important roles in contemporary local projects that empower communities to restore cultural pride, solidify their identities and enable them to negotiate with policy makers over issues related to life in the modern world, including business interests, dialogue on religious beliefs and ritual performances, tourism, land claims and re-interpretations of historical records.

How does the analogy of 'intellectual soup' based on the efforts of the Ngadjuri Elders of mid-north South Australia to obtain field notes of Ronald Berndt held by the University of Western Australia apply to the theme of the 2021 BASR Conference on disciplinary futures in the study of religion/s? To answer this, I return to the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued forcefully for a method that includes the perspectives of believers in any academic descriptions and interpretations of religious communities (Cox, 2016, xii-xvii). Writing in 1959, Smith maintained that the study of religion was undergoing a fundamental transformation from one that regards religion objectively as an 'it' to a more personal understanding of the inner faith of believers (W.C. Smith, 1959, 34). Smith explained that the first stage in personalising the study of religion had already occurred, since scholars had begun describing personal faith in terms of what people, referred to as 'they', say, do or believe. This even now is advancing to a deeper level whereby scholars are becoming aware of their own involvement with those they are studying, so that 'we' are now talking about what 'they' say, do or believe. Smith then urged scholars to advance to the next phase in the personalization process by adopting a dialogical approach so that the 'they' is changed to a 'you' and the study becomes one of 'we' talking to 'you'. If this is accomplished, a scholar will finally understand that the study of human faith requires breaking down the old subject-object dichotomy so that the one doing the studying and the one being studied merge into a common enterprise consisting of '"we all" … talking with each other about '"us"' (W. C. Smith, 1959, 34). The culmination of the dialogical approach, Smith (1959, 55) concluded, results in the recognition that 'in comparative religion man is studying himself'.

In a book entitled *Towards a World Theology,* published twenty-two years after he wrote these words, Smith (1981, 59-60) renamed and revised the dialogical method, calling it 'corporate critical self-consciousness'. By this he was referring to a form of reflexivity whereby the scholar adopts a 'critical, rational and inductive' self-conscious approach to the study of a community of persons, a community that is comprised of at least two people, the one doing the studying and the one being studied (W.C. Smith, 1981, 60). The community, what Smith called earlier the 'we' talking to 'us', becomes aware of 'any given particular human condition, or action as a condition or action of itself as a community' (W.C. Smith, 1981, 60). In other words, when scholars engage in a study of religion, they include themselves as humans in their investigations as well as the participants in the communities they are studying. This implies that the scholar experiences and understands the conditions or actions he or she is studying simultaneously, both subjectively as participant and objectively as observer. In this way, the subjective experience of the scholar, comprising a personal and existential involvement, is united with objective knowledge, which adopts an external, critical, analytical and scientific perspective.

The results of scholarship are verified using this method both subjectively and objectively, experientially and empirically. Smith (1981, 97) called this 'the verificationist principle' of 'humane knowledge'. The principle is applied in three stages. The first requires that an outside observer's statement be acceptable to the faith of the community being studied. He writes:

> No statement about Islamic faith is true that Muslims cannot accept. No personalist statement about Hindu religious life is legitimate in which Hindus cannot recognize themselves. No interpretation of Buddhist doctrine is valid unless Buddhists can respond, 'Yes! That is what we hold' (W.C. Smith, 1981, 97).

The second part of the principle applies to the outside observer, so that what is said about faith communities 'must satisfy the non-participant, and satisfy all the most exacting requirements of rational inquiry and academic rigour' (W.C. Smith, 1981, 97). Finally, the third aspect applies to people of other faiths, so that no statement about Muslims, for example, can be regarded as true that non-Muslims cannot accept. No account of Hinduism can be legitimate if the Hindu's neighbours cannot recognize the Hindu in the accounts. 'No statement about Buddhist doctrine is valid unless non-Buddhists can respond, "Yes – now we understand what those Buddhists hold"' (W.C. Smith, 1981, 97).

We can see the verificationist principle in action if we apply it to the thirty-year struggle of Ngadjuri Elders to claim their right of ownership over notes, which contain crucial information about their own cultural traditions and genealogical records that were compiled some eighty years ago by the academic researcher, Ronald Berndt. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's insights are particularly relevant to building a case in support of joint ownership of research projects by those doing the studying and those being studied. The collaboration begins at the inception of the research design and is carried forward through conducting the research to the interpretation and dissemination of the findings. The gradual recognition among academics following Smith's outline results in the admission that the researcher and the researched form part of a community: 'we' talking about 'us'. This is precisely what the scholars, Claire Smith, Gary Jackson, and the Ngadjuri Elder Vincent Copley Sr, intended when they likened a research project to cooking an 'intellectual soup'. From determining the participants in the research (the cooks) through devising the recipe to consuming the final product, the entire project is collectively owned. Humane knowledge, when understood as corporate, is verified by the insiders (those being studied), the outsiders (those who do the studying) and interested parties (those who share common interests in the results of the research). This means that no one participant has the power to impose an interpretation on the findings because the project is collectively owned.

If we apply the concept Wilfred Cantwell Smith called 'corporate critical self-consciousness' faithfully and rigorously to the persistent efforts of Ngadjuri Elders to gain access to notes about their own traditions, as scholars, we will confirm that true and verifiable knowledge of Ngadjuri communities can be attained only by fully participating with them in developing research goals and carrying them to completion. W. C. Smith (1981, 78-79) would call this an example of achieving 'humane knowledge', the aim of which is not pure objectivity, but 'disciplined corporate self-consciousness, critical, comprehensive, global', a form of knowing that collapses once and for all the subject-

object dichotomy that for so long has dominated Western approaches to the study of fellow human beings.

Critiques of a Dialogical Approach in the Study of Religions: Robert Segal and Laurie L. Patton

By referring to an argument developed in the last century by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a phenomenologist and liberal theologian, I could be accused of hanging on to and perpetuating outdated and increasingly discredited epistemological theories that commit the error of confusing insider or confessional perspectives with outsider or scientific analyses. This is precisely the critique made by Robert Segal (2017, 174) against what he calls the 'veridical epistemology' advocated by Smith. Segal (2017, 174) explains that on Smith's interpretation of religion, adherents 'hold veto power over any outsider's proffered interpretation'. He adds: 'If adherents can decide which interpretations are wrong, then they can decide which ones are right' (Segal, 2017, 174).

In place of Smith's 'dialogical' method in the study of religion, Segal argues that the best term to describe the association between a researcher and a religious person is 'diagnosis' following the analogy of a doctor-patient relationship. Segal contends that 'there is nothing reciprocal in the relationship of adherent to scholar'. Rather, 'just as the patient has the disease but is not thereby the authority on it, so the adherent has the religion but is not thereby the expert on it' (Segal, 2017, 174). He admits that both scholars and doctors require subjects to perform their functions, but they rely on their subjects solely for information. The scholar has studied a community's religion in detail according to scientific protocols, which makes the roles of the researcher and the adherent fundamentally different. Even if the believer is able to convey a large amount of information to a scholar, just like a doctor, the researcher is the expert on the religion being studied.

As an example of his analysis, Segal cites the work of the anthropologist Roy Rappaport, who in his study of the Tsembaga Maring farmers of New Guinea in *Pigs for Ancestors* (1968), contends that the ritual killing of pigs has quite functional economic and health benefits to the community. Segal explains that the ritual slaughter of the pigs, following Rappaport, serves to keep their numbers under control with the result that the pigs do not damage the ground in ways that make planting difficult. The ritual eating of the pigs, moreover, provides the people with a source of protein. Segal labels Rappaport's analysis a 'resolutely materialist view of religion', which is 'supported by heaps of data accumulated over fourteen months of fieldwork and years of thinking'. In a dig at Smith's dialogical method, Segal (2017, 175) concludes: 'I would not be prepared to assume that he [Rappaport] learned less about the meaning of religion for his natives than a session on Papua New Guinea of the world's parliament of religions would have yielded'.

Another position relevant to Smith's concept 'corporate critical self-consciousness' has been developed by the American scholar of religion, Laurie L. Patton, in her recent book, *Who Owns Religion?* (2019). Although Patton considers the idea of religion as a conceptual category, she primarily focuses on the conflicts created by interpretations of specific religious communities proposed by academics that are rejected or criticised by the members of the communities themselves. Through a series of case studies

highlighting controversies, or what she calls 'scandals', occurring during the late 1980s and through the 1990s, Patton addresses directly the problem for scholarly interpretations of religion created by the empathetic approach advocated by Smith, which seems to privilege the interpretative right of adherents over the analytical perspectives of scholars. Patton describes situations where the interpretations of religious groups proposed by academics have so offended believing communities that hostility, threats and violence have resulted.

Patton (2019, 41) highlights conditions that create conflict between what she calls 'the scholar's right to interpret' and the 'agency' of religious groups. She claims that academics' freedom to analyse and hence interpret 'derives from the discourse of objectivity', but if that is challenged, 'from the discourse of cultural critique' (Patton, 2019, 41). She argues that 'religious communities have no agency in endowing scholars with the right to interpret' (Patton, 2019, 41). That power is restricted to members of the community interpreting themselves. Religious groups, however, can pass judgement on the interpretations developed by academics. In sharp contrast to the position advocated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Patton (2019, 41) maintains that 'there is no social contract between religious communities and university communities' because there are 'no commonly understood norms, no agreed-upon standard as to who has the "right" to interpret'. The relationship between religious studies departments and religious communities, according to Patton (2019, 43), is 'tension-filled' due to the inherent conflict over '*the rivalry to represent*'. She admits that frequently academics adopt a sympathetic attitude towards the communities they are studying, but she insists that 'such bonhomie cannot obscure the fundamentally irreconcilable views about the right to interpret the same religious texts and artifacts' (Patton, 2019, 43).

Patton (2019, 46) acknowledges that in earlier stages in the development of the history of religions the academic did not expect 'to be argued with by anyone other than his or her peers'. In contemporary society, this assumption has been challenged. Nowadays, the 'audience has become vocal' (Patton, 2019, 47). This is not a problem to be resolved, but can be construed as 'constitutive to the study of religion' (Patton, 2019, 47). The 'rivalry of representation' includes the communities that academics study as 'new interlocutors' (Patton, 2019, 47). Patton (2019, 47) concludes:

> The study of religions must not stop when members of the religions themselves
> start speaking in direct response to what historians of religions have written.
> Rather, we should make those responses part of the process of the study itself.

Responses to Segal and Patton

Robert Segal's critique of Wilfred Cantwell Smith exemplifies exactly the approach to the study of religious communities that I am rejecting in this article. He likens adherents to 'patients' who do not know what is best for them and are beholden to the expert to diagnose their problem and to prescribe a remedy. This disempowering of religious communities results from the failure to respect knowledge that is at the very least a shared commodity. For example, even if Rappaport's interpretation of the material benefits of ritual pig killing is correct, it does not invalidate nor lessen the importance of how the community understands the spiritual influence pigs have over health and well-being, even if the spiritual effects are largely psychological. Segal also minimises the fact that adherents are under no obligation to supply scholars with 'information', which

academics then are free to use in ways that are entirely unaccountable to the sources of research data, and with which the communities being studied do not share or may even oppose.

In my view, Segal has reverted to an outdated, anachronistic reductionist and objectivist methodology. He implies that the aim of research on living communities is to explain their behaviour as if the interaction between the researcher and the researched had no influence over what the scholar observes or chooses to emphasise. His objectivist stance also assumes that the researched communities remain unaffected by the presence of academics and, as a result, the information they provide is freely given and totally honest. Segal's denial of the importance to research findings created by the reciprocal relationship between the scholar and religious communities being studied leads me to conclude that is not Wilfred Cantwell Smith who promotes outmoded epistemological theories, but it is Segal who has done so due his presuppositions about how nature works and what constitutes objectivity.

Clearly, Laurie Patton's analysis of the fraught relationship between scholars and religious communities is more subtle that Segal's presentation. Nonetheless, she has chosen to emphasise conflicts between the aims of academic institutions and religious organisations. She suggests that adherents have no interpretative rights apart from self-interpretations. For this reason, academics have limited choices. They can present their interpretations of the communities they are studying in ways that would not offend the communities they are researching; or they can exercise academic freedom and portray the religious communities in ways in which communities might not recognise themselves or with which they would strongly disagree; or they can remain silent and avoid offending religious believers.

Patton is fully aware of the colonial history and power relations inherent between academics and those they are researching. I believe, however, she treats too lightly the questions about the 'ownership', not of 'religion', but of knowledge. The source for any academic study is the knowledge contained in the history, texts, stories, ceremonies and memories of religious communities. Although historical records and textual studies differ from ethnographic research, insofar as they represent living societies, the knowledge on which academic interpretations are derived resides within the communities themselves. Access to knowledge, particularly if it comes from current sources, must be negotiated in recognition that the communities own the knowledge (note, not information) that they are sharing with a researcher. In contrast to Patton's description of the interests of the researcher and researched as oppositional, the most productive approach is precisely what she rules out: a social contract between the scholarly and religious communities

Whereas Segal's approach depicts an unequal relationship between the scholar and religious adherents (like a doctor to a patient), Patton's method is to incorporate the reactions of believing community's into her representations of them by making even oppositional responses a part of the data of her research. Despite their differences, both Segal and Patton force us to question the purpose of scholarly enquiry. On a relational model, in line with the phenomenological method in the study of religion, the aim of the study of religion is not to explain (which usually means to 'explain away') religion but to foster understanding based on an intense empathy. This point was made by the British phenomenologist, Ninian Smart, when he invited his readers to consider the life and behaviour of Adolf Hitler, who for most people represents a historical figure with whom it

would appear impossible to empathise. Smart (1984, 264) asks, 'Does it mean that I need to be a Hitler-lover to understand him?' Initially, this might appear to be the case because to empathise with Hitler would mean that we need to 'get into his soul' and 'drop our preconceptions, and treat Hitler as a human being who had his own thought world' (Smart, 1984, 264). This involves following him 'through his Austrian childhood and relationship to his father and dear mother; through his scholastic failures and outcast status in Vienna; through his years in the trenches fighting in France' (Smart, 1984, 264). In other words, Smart calls on us to treat Adolf Hitler as a human being', but, he adds, 'all this is strictly *empathy*', 'getting the feel of' (Smart, 1984, 264) (emphasis in original). Empathy, he argues, does not require condoning Hitler's actions nor approving 'in any way the rightness of his creed' (Smart, 1984, 264). Smart's argument is rooted in the phenomenological contention that nothing human ultimately is alien to other humans. This principle promotes the idea that the fundamental aim of the study of religion is to create a deep understanding (*Verstehen*) of human beliefs, practices and behaviours, even if those beliefs, practices and behaviours are offensive to the one doing the research or harmful to large segments of the general population.

'Relationality' : A Future Direction in the Academic Study of Religion/s

My argument thus far suggests that research projects that are designed collectively, are founded on shared aims, carry out data collection through consultation, and achieve consensus on the findings, radically change the understanding and interpretation of knowledge. I am calling this approach, following the lead of Lauren Tynan, an Indigenous researcher at Macquarie University, Australia, 'relationality'. Tynan (2021, 598) contends that 'relationality' in an Australian context 'is learnt from Country', but now as 'Indigenous knowledges and research methodologies gain recognition in academia, there is an increasing need for Indigenous scholars to articulate relational practices in print form'. Writing as an Indigenous person, Tynan (2021, 600) explains that 'relationality is how the world is known and how we, as Peoples, Country, entities, stories and more-than-human kin know ourselves and our responsibilities to one another'.[2] Following Tynan's lead, I am using 'relationality' in a broad sense as a model for developing new methods in the study of religion/s that will expand our application in practice of the phenomenological 'understanding'. Tynan (2021, 600) puts it this way: 'A relational reality creates relationships between ideas or entities, it is an affective force that compels us to not just *understand* the world as relational, but to *feel* the world as kin' (emphasis in original). On this model, empirical results based on a concept of relationality may differ markedly in response to the same research questions posed in different contexts, in part due to the impact of the interchanges occurring among those participating in the project.

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[2] I am aware that 'relationality', conceived as 'relational research', is used in many other contexts, such as quantitative methods in the technical sense of correlating the relationship between two variables (Bryman and Bell, 2015, 352-55), and even in the field of economic geography (Bathalt and Glückler, 2018,179-95). Relational research is closely connected to theories of social constructionism, which contend that knowledge results not from pure observation but from social communication and interaction. Social constructivists maintain, in the words of Titus Hjelm (2020, 763), 'that people construct social reality in interaction, especially through language'. This concept is now formalised in a relational research network that has emerged from work of the Taos Institute, a virtual organisation founded in 1993 in Taos, New Mexico, which on its web page states that it is a 'community of scholars and practitioners concerned with the social processes essential for the construction of reason, knowledge, and human value' (https://www.taosinstitute.net/about-us, accessed 24 October 2022).

In support of this conclusion, I draw on recent work, which for me is derived from an entirely unexpected source, that of theoretical physics, as voiced by one of the leading experts in this field, Carlo Rovelli, who is Director of the Quantum Gravity Research Group of the Centre of Theoretical Physics in Marseille, France. In his book *Helgoland*, Rovelli (2021, 68) contends that the world we observe 'is continuously interacting'. He adds: 'It is a dense web of *interactions*' (emphasis in original). Rovelli (2021, 68) explains:

> Individual objects *are* the way in which they interact. If there was an object that had no interactions, no effect upon anything, emitted no light, attracted nothing and repelled nothing, was not touched and had no smell … it would be as good as non-existent (emphasis in original).

This seemingly simple conclusion has profound consequences for the way we experience the world, including the living populations with which researchers engage. On one level, it would appear that a researcher functions primarily as an observer of the activities of groups being studied. Simple observation, however, is impossible, as demonstrated by quantum physics. Rovelli (2021, 69) maintains that the discovery of quantum theory 'is the discovery that the properties of any entity are nothing other than the way in which that entity influences others. It exists only through its interactions.' He explains: '*Facts that are real with respect to an object are not necessarily so with respect to another*. A property may be real with respect to a stone, and not real with respect to another stone' (Rovelli, 2021, 72) (emphasis in original). To clarify his point, Rovelli (2021, 77-8) adds:

> The world fractures into a play of points of view that do not admit of a univocal, global vision. It is a world of perspectives, of manifestation, not of entities with definite properties or unique facts. Properties do not reside in objects, they are bridges between objects. Objects are such only with respect to other objects, they are nodes where bridges meet. The world is a perspectival game, a play of mirrors that exist only as reflections of and in each other.

In support of this conclusion, Rovelli refers to 'quantum superposition', which, he explains, occurs 'when two contradictory properties are, in a certain sense, present together' (Rovelli (2021, 44). This means that 'an object could be here but at the same time elsewhere' (Rovelli, 2021, 44). He adds that we can never observe a superposition, but only see the consequences of it, what he calls 'quantum interference' (Rovelli, 2021, 44). Rovelli recounts that he witnessed quantum interference in the laboratory of the Austrian experimental physicist, Anton Zeilinger. Zeilinger set up an experiment using optical instruments including a small laser, lenses, prism mirrors, which separate the laser beam and then reintegrate it, and photon detectors. In the experiment, a number of photons was split into two parts by the prism, one set following a left path and the other the right path, before reuniting and dividing again, eventually one set going up and the other down. When Rovelli blocked either one of the two paths with his hand, half ended in the up position and half in the down position. If he did not block the path, all the photons went into the down detector; none travelled upwards. Rovelli (2021, 46) explains that 'the disappearance of the photons from the upper detector when *both* paths are open is an example of *quantum interference*' (emphasis in original). This is demonstrated by the fact that 'each photon behaves as if it passed through both trajectories, … but if we

look to see where the photon is, we always see it on just one path'. Rovelli (2021, 47) adds that 'it seems that you need only to *observe* for what is happening to change!' He concludes:

> The very act of measuring which path the photon takes causes the interference to disappear! If we measure where they pass, half of the photons go upward again….This is quantum superposition: the photon is, so to say, "on two paths". But if you search for it, it is only on one path (Rovelli, 2021, 47-48).

This experiment would seem to support the classical idealist position, as voiced in the eighteenth century by the empiricist philosopher, George Berkeley, who famously declared, 'To be is to be perceived' (Cox, 2006, 12-13). Or it appears consistent with the thinking of the early twentieth-century German phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, who emphasised the centrality of perception in constructing reality and in the process challenged naïve assumptions about the world, which he called 'the natural attitude' (Cox, 2006, 19-20; Husserl, 1931, 106). A contemporary interpretation of this epistemological approach has been developed by the American mathematical physicist, Henry Stapp. In a chapter in a book devoted to examining current concepts of matter, edited by Paul Davies and Niels Henrik Gregersen. Stapp refers to the development of the thought of the early pioneers of quantum mechanics, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli, who, according to Stapp, replaced the 'then-prevailing Newtonian idea of matter as "solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, moveable particles" with a new concept that allowed, and in fact demanded, entry into the laws governing the motion of matter of the consequences of decisions made by human subjects' (Stapp, 2014, 134). Stapp argues that the new physics demonstrated that we live in 'a universe in which we human beings, by means of our intentional effort, can make a difference in how the "matter" in our bodies behaves' (Stapp, 2014, 134). Stapp (2014, 137) put this somewhat differently when he asserted that 'our human minds can introduce elements of definiteness into the description of nature that the physically described processes of nature, acting alone, leave unspecified'. Quantum mechanics, following Stapp (2014, 142), insists that 'the physically described world is not a world of material substances, as normally conceived, but is rather a world of potentialities for future experiences'. In a manner consistent with Rovelli, Stapp (2014, 144) concludes that 'one's own conscious subjective efforts can influence the experiences that follow', which is continually reconfirmed by the fact that 'our conscious efforts can influence certain kinds of experiential feedback'.

If the physical world Rovelli and Stapp describe as revealed by quantum theory is responsive to human thoughts, intentions and actions, how much more ought those who conduct research among human communities shift their assumptions to make each interaction perspectival and relative to concerns shared dialogically by each participant in a research project. The so-called objectivity that defines the aims of much 'scientific' research, which is frequently funded by Western academic institutions and research agencies, if we follow Rovelli and Stapp, is exposed as an illusion, or at best, derived from an obsolete model based on a static worldview.

Relational research methods, when interpreted and applied as Indigenous relationality, insist that all parties in a research programme must be involved actively in the descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of a community's beliefs, practices, and alleged experiences. Otherwise, power is being exercised unfairly and knowledge that

results from local sources is being exploited for the scholar's own ends, or at least for purposes unrelated to the interests of the community being described and explained. If they accept this premise, academics will voluntarily impose a limitation on their research design by involving the subjects of research not only in the descriptions of their traditional practices, but also in the content and scope of the interpretations and explanations achieved. Although this approach clearly restricts the traditional aims of research by yielding to Segal's complaint that it affords to the researched subjects the right to 'veto' the privileged interpretations academics propose, it represents a necessary limitation constraining all scholarly projects, in Rovelli's (2021: 84) words, by 'remembering that properties exist only in relation to something else'.

Concluding Remarks

I began this article by describing how the Religious Studies programme at the University of Edinburgh has gradually evolved from its inception in 1971 until it now recognises the central importance of locality in the description and analysis of religious communities. I then argued, following the division of knowledge into three types as outlined by the social anthropologist J.A. Barnes, that the next stage in reformulating the study of religions is to acknowledge that the local communities themselves, which constitute the subject matter of academic projects, actually own the knowledge that is being investigated; it is their communal intellectual property. If this point is admitted, it becomes clear that religious adherents must be involved throughout the development and implementation of a research project in full recognition that they are in control of what they choose to reveal to outside researchers. Academics are enabled to conduct research only by invitation, as Graham Harvey (2003, 125-46) has suggested, as 'guests' of the communities to which they are invited. Once invited, researchers are confronted with increasingly complicated issues resulting from questions about what they do with the knowledge acquired according to academic principles, while still respecting the property of those being investigated.

To resolve the dilemma created by the potential conflict between academic and community interests in research projects, in this paper, I highlighted insights articulated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who maintained that scholarly interpretations that offend the religious communities being studied are illegitimate because they distort the data on which the interpretations are based. I continue to support this conclusion, particularly in light of the principle of relationality that I have found central to the work of Indigenous scholars and, from an entirely different field, by the analyses of the theoretical physicists, Carlo Rovelli and Henry Stapp. In my view, Wilfred Cantwell Smith correctly asserted that religious adherents, who cannot recognise themselves in the scholarly explanations offered, are not being described or interpreted accurately nor, following Rovelli and Stapp, are scientific principles being observed. This is because the validity of explanations must be judged on criteria that include believing communities themselves, without which there would be no data on which to build academic theories and without which genuine understanding cannot be achieved.

Finally, we have seen in this article, by examining the efforts of Ngadjuri Elders to recover forgotten memories from the embargoed notes of the anthropologist Ronald Berndt, how an Indigenous society, which traditionally guarded its knowledge as secret, was subjected to the power exercised by outside forces, including academics, colonial administrators and missionary agents. The changes occurring currently in Australia bear

witness to the increasing impact on public perceptions of Indigenous groups, like the Ngadjuri of South Australia, who are reclaiming the knowledge that was originally theirs, re-interpreting that knowledge for contemporary times and re-empowering local communities as they restore the memory of past traditions. These important developments, illustrated by just one Australian Indigenous group, demonstrate that, when research projects are re-configured in terms of local agency, relationality and the communal ownership of knowledge, disciplinary futures in the study of religion/s for the twenty-first century are transformed in their design, execution, explanation and dissemination.

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