

**British Association for the Study of Religions  
Ethical Guidelines  
(final version, 17 September 2019)**

**1. Introduction**

*1.1 Background*

A “Framework of Professional Practice” was formulated in 2005 by AUDTRS (Association of University Departments in Theology and Religious Studies, renamed to TRS-UK in 2015). This framework was eventually appropriated by the Higher Education Academy. The Framework was designed to be short, highlighting broad areas for ethical reflection, rather than offering firm guidelines.

The need for a revised and somewhat more detailed Ethical Guidelines for researchers was thought desirable for several reasons. Institutional research committees and grant awarding bodies now often require assurance that research projects have undergone ethics scrutiny and conform to an adequate professional code of practice relating to the subject area. Additionally, the emergence of digital tools and increased attention to digital contexts has sharpened ethical hazard for certain areas of research, necessitating a renewal of existing guidance.

*1.2 Purpose of the Ethical Guidelines*

The purpose of the Ethical Guidelines is to highlight to researchers in the study of religions the areas in which ethical issues arise, and to make them aware of their responsibilities. The Guidelines also demonstrates to institutional authorities, to subjects who participate in research, and to the wider public, the standards to which researchers in the field are committed.

*1.3 Scope of the Ethical Guidelines*

The Ethical Guidelines is aimed at scholars who are engaged in research in the study of religions at undergraduate, postgraduate, and postdoctoral level in educational institutions in the United Kingdom. The Guidelines also applies to situations outside academic institutions, for example where one is engaged in consultancy work, engaging with the media, or giving evidence as an expert witness in a court of law.

While acknowledging that there are other areas that raise ethical issues, such as teaching, examining, and curriculum planning, these Ethical Guidelines principally addresses issues relating to research.

*1.4 The socio-political environment*

No scholarly research happens in a socio-political vacuum. Researchers should also consider the likely consequences of their research for the wider society as well as the immediate research participants. This is especially important when the research involves marginalised or vulnerable groups, including but not limited to diverse ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ communities, displaced and disabled people, and children.

That information can be misconstrued or misused is not in itself a convincing argument against its collection and dissemination. However, scholars need to take an open and ethical stance towards major issues of the time, so that as far as possible, Religious Studies research

does not collude with common structural oppressions such as colonialism, imperialism, and the ongoing degradation of sentient life, human dignity or the wider environment.

### *1.5 The nature of research in the study of religions*

The study of religions (also known as religious studies) is a polymethodic field of study, much of which involves contact with or observation of participants. It draws on a variety of academic disciplines, including, but not limited to, anthropology, geography, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, statistics, and theology.

Some research on religions is entirely literature-based. However, this does not mean that such studies are necessarily devoid of ethical considerations.

Although much research on religions involves participants, a biomedical model for ethical practice is inappropriate. Most research in the subject is not experimental or physically invasive, and hence it is not always necessarily appropriate or even practical for human participants to give written consent for research. Where religious gatherings are open to the public, or where researchers are explicitly invited to an event, there should be no need for the researcher to seek explicit consent or institutional ethical approval, although appropriate standards of behaviour are nonetheless expected. The researcher remains responsible for considering, mitigating where possible, and managing harm. Harm should be considered in relation to participants, particularly if vulnerable, and researcher.

Ethics is itself part of the subject matter of the study of religions, and hence researchers can be expected to have familiarity with ethical decision-making, and how different religious communities have different ethical values. Ethical decisions can at times be contentious, and are often matters of personal judgement. It is important that ethics should not be merely conflated with methodology, health and safety, risk assessment, or the feasibility of research, although these are areas of institutional concern, and at times bear some relationship to ethical considerations.

The BASR does not adjudicate or intervene on allegations of unethical behaviour, but can act as a forum for discussion on ethical matters.

## **2. General principles**

### *2.1 Professional integrity*

Research should always maintain the highest standards of integrity, with due regard for all stakeholders involved. Researchers should be committed to maintaining the basic principles of honesty, rigour, transparency, and respect.

The purpose of ethical guidelines is not to impose undue restrictions on scholars, for whom the key principles of academic freedom and the advancement of knowledge remain paramount.

Researchers should identify and respect the interests of all stakeholders who have an interest in their work. They have a responsibility for ensuring that their findings are reported as accurately as possible, and that their material is used responsibly.

Research should be conducted legally and responsibly, with due regard for the law of the land (both domestic and foreign) and for institutional regulations. In particular, researchers should be aware of laws and regulations relating to data protection, human rights, copyright, and libel.

Researchers should be aware of the scope and limits of their professional competence, and should not undertake work for which they are unqualified, or claim expertise outside

their range of competence. The role of consultants in research should be made explicit, and appropriately acknowledged.

### *2.2 Equality*

Scholars of religion should be acquainted with their institutional policies of equal opportunities and be compliant with them. However, it should be acknowledged that numerous religious communities are not committed to the same principles of equality as an academic institution or the investigating scholar might wish. Researchers may at times be prevented from gaining access to premises or parts of them, or to events, for example on the grounds of gender, religion, or ethnicity. Some research topics can only be explored effectively by scholars of a particular gender or ethnicity, and this must be recognised, notwithstanding normal considerations of equal opportunities.

However, wherever it is practical, care should be taken not to exclude a researcher from a project on the grounds of gender, race, religion, or ethnicity, and every effort should be made to ensure fair representation in collaborative enterprises.

## **3. The conduct of research**

### *3.1 Respect*

In undertaking fieldwork or participant-observation, researchers should familiarise themselves with the expectations of the community under research. It is important to act in a manner that shows due respect, both for members of the community and their environment, and to ensure that one does not cause offence. It is important, both in conducting one's research, and in presenting one's findings, to ensure that subsequent researchers' work is not hampered by one's conduct, and that the reputation of the subject is maintained.

When coming into contact with religious communities, there is often a disparity in power relationships. The researcher has the power to place his or her findings in the public domain, while religious communities typically have gatekeepers with the power to allow or prevent access. These relationships need to be negotiated, and appropriate agreements secured.

### *3.2 Obtaining consent*

While the principle of informed consent is an ideal, it may be unnecessary to obtain consent to attend a public gathering, or in situations where the researcher is explicitly invited to an event. Consent does not necessarily need to be written. Indeed, obtaining written consent can involve difficulties – for example, when researching communities who do not speak English, or where it is unclear who is authorised to give consent. In many situations, undue formalisation of the relationship between researcher and participants might hamper the conduct of the research, and it can be appropriate to assume implicit consent. Researchers should reflect on the ethical demands which pertain to their context.

When administering questionnaires, or conducting interviews, the researcher should be satisfied that his or her participants have given consent, and they should be informed that they have the right to withdraw at any time, without having to give reasons. Researchers should provide personal contact details to intimate any concerns about the research, or to declare any intention to withdraw.

### *3.3 Transparency and confidentiality*

At all times the purpose of one's research should be made clear to informants, and how information obtained will be used.

The researcher should pay due regard to the sensitivities, interests, and well-being of the participant under study, and minimise inconvenience to them. Where sensitive information is divulged to a researcher, careful consideration must be given as to how or whether this is used. Name anonymity should normally be preserved, with the exception of well-known figures whose names are already prominent in the public domain.

Guarantees of confidentiality should be realistic, since it is impossible to maintain total confidentiality when one places one's findings in the public domain. Guarantees should be clarified and should be honoured. Careful consideration needs to be given as to whether participants might be permitted to see notes and transcripts, or whether and how they might be allowed to view material prior to publication, and how any comments will be treated by the researcher.

Photography, filming, and audio-recording should normally be overt, and undertaken with the consent of the participants involved. Written permission is normally needed where a researcher intends to publish material in which individuals can be identified. When using historical photographs every effort should be taken to identify individuals shown and that photographs taken against the will of those depicted are thoroughly contextualised and, whenever possible, living relatives are contacted for permission.

### *3.4 Vulnerable individuals and groups*

Some research participants may be vulnerable because of age, disability, and physical or mental health. Some individuals and communities are vulnerable on account of prejudice, while others are at risk of being over-used by researchers where members are few in number. Particular care is needed in researching these groups, to ensure that proper consent has been given, and that the researcher's portrayal is fair and accurate.

Where research involves children and vulnerable adults, researchers should ensure that they have obtained the relevant training and complied with legal requirements for safeguarding. Consent must be given by a relevant parent or guardian.

When working with communities that have experienced past trauma, the researcher should ensure that there is a minimal risk of the research causing repeat trauma either through the research process (interviews that explore painful past experiences) or through the publication of research findings (that may draw attention to a community that remains vulnerable). In such circumstances, the researcher should ensure that appropriate supports are put in place for anyone experiencing emotional distress (from social services, NGOs and charities).

### *3.5 Protection and storage of data*

Data obtained in the course of one's research, such as field notes and confidential or sensitive documents, should be safely stored so that it cannot be accessed by unauthorised persons. Where material is stored in digital form, researchers must comply with the Data Protection Act.

Data may be archived by researchers, unless there is a legal or contractual requirement to do otherwise. Because research in the subject is often diachronic, it may be important to compare data from one time period to another, and hence it is inappropriate for an institution to require the destruction of data after a specified period.

## **4. Publishing**

### *4.1 Contractual obligations*

It is in the interests both of the scholar and the wider community to disseminate one's findings. Scholars have an obligation to fulfil the terms of any publisher's contract, to deliver a manuscript reliably, within the agreed time frame, and with any copyright clearance when needed.

### *4.2 Recognition*

Scholarly research should be diligent and honest. Fabrication and falsification of data are unacceptable, as is plagiarism. Where an author's material is reused in another publication, appropriate permission should be sought, and due acknowledgement made. Care should be made to attribute the involvement of research participants in scholarly work at an appropriate level, up to co-authorship.

Any conflicts of interest should be made explicit.

Declared authorship of books, chapters, and articles should be a true reflection of the researchers' input. Ghost authorship and gift authorship are unacceptable in academic writing, as is the practice of adding extra names in multi-authored works where their contribution has been minimal, or where their permission has not been sought.

## **5. Funding and sponsorship of research**

When research is sponsored or supported by a funding body, due acknowledgement should be given, and there should be openness concerning the sources of financing. Acceptance of monies or other incentives (such as hospitality or travel) is normally a matter of personal decision for the researcher, although at times there may be institutional embargos on certain funding sources.

Researchers have the responsibility to identify the sources of any remuneration, and to ensure that sponsorship does not compromise the integrity of one's research, or dictate the conclusions that the researcher should reach.

Researchers should comply with the contractual expectations of their sponsors. However, at the outset they should clarify the terms and conditions of sponsorship, which may include matters like publication destinations, dissemination of findings, potential publicity for the researcher or his/her institution, and whether there might be subsequent expectations such as lending support to a controversial organisation.

## **6. Covert research**

The right to privacy is defined as a fundamental human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Any researcher contemplating covert research should take careful account of the relevant legal framework surrounding the right to privacy.

Covert research militates against the principles of transparency and informed consent, and should in most cases be avoided, particularly when such research is conducted in private rather than public space. However, there may be situations in which important data cannot be obtained in any other way, for example if it is important to access a community that wishes to avoid scrutiny, or where participants might modify their behaviour in the presence of a

researcher. Covert research should only be undertaken in circumstances where it is impossible to collect data by other, more open, means.

## **7. Digital Research**

Research in digital environments, such as (but not limited to) the online environment and video games, can lead to ethical questions regarding representation, anonymity, the identity of participants, and many others. Several of these ethical considerations are not limited to the online environment.

It should also be noted that while online usernames may appear, or be considered to be anonymous in the offline context, these usernames are attached to history, personality, and context which has a life of its own, even if not connected to the offline life. When interviewing participants online with only reference to username, and anonymity is requested, a pseudonym should be used in place of an online name, as these have as much context as an offline name. Proper and true representation of the voices of the participants should be respected.

Honesty in self-representation as a researcher is ethically paramount for online research just as it is offline. The researcher should make the nature of their presence and participation as researcher clear to both participants as well as any necessary gatekeepers (e.g. moderators who allow people to post on forums).

## **8. Circulating and revising**

The Ethical Guidelines should be made available to students and researchers engaged in the study of religion, and should be circulated as widely as possible.

The Guidelines will be reviewed at regular intervals, and revised and updated when necessary.

## **BASR Ethics Working Party**

The working party consists of Bettina Schmidt (BASR President, University of Wales Trinity Saint David), George D. Chryssides (York St John University and University of Birmingham), Vivian Asimos (Durham University), Lidia Guzy (University College Cork), James Kapalo (University College Cork), Jeremy Kidwell (University of Birmingham), Suzanne Owen (Leeds Trinity University), Giorgio Scalici (Durham University), Beth Singler (University of Cambridge), Paul-Francois Tremlett (Open University), Jonathan Tuckett (University of Stirling), Theo Wildcroft (Open University).

Other relevant documents:

British Sociological Association (2017). BSA Statement of Ethical Practice. Accessible online at: [www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa\\_statement\\_of\\_ethical\\_practice.pdf](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf)

Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (1999). Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice. Accessible online at:

[https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical_guidelines.pdf)

Association of Internet Researchers: Accessible online at: <https://aoir.org/ethics>

Gov.UK (2018). Data Protection. Accessible online at: [www.gov.uk/data-protection](http://www.gov.uk/data-protection)

Universities UK (2012). The Concordat to support research integrity. Accessible online at: [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2012/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2012/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf)