Review of *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies*

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The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies. Edited by Bernadette Flanagan and Kerri Clough. Routledge, 2025. Pp. 432. Hardback $225.00; eBook $47.99. (9781032377278)

Let's change the ordinary gravity of academe and experiment with a contemplative review. It seems reasonable, I think, and far too seldom, that a book on Contemplative Studies be read, reviewed, and engaged contemplatively.

By way of an introduction, then, I propose that we slow into this review with a simple practice for the purpose of becoming authentically present with a volume that can help transform how we practice research, education, and social healing. This practice has three steps; each step asks for approximately a minute of your time and welcomes personalized attunements. I challenge you to really do this practice—and gently resist the pull of modernity's fast pace.

First, breathe. Just breathe. Breathe however you want to breathe. Second, touch your heart and ask yourself aloud, while appreciating the distinct sound your own voice makes: *Why have I come to this review?* Ask also: *What unanswered question about research do I want this book to help me understand?* Third and finally, write your answers down—and let them remain open, like a fallow field after the spring rain. We begin again, then: aware of our breath, our heart, and our unanswered questions.

The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies, edited by Bernadette Flanagan and Kerri Clough, is a vital resource on how to take a contemplative stance in research and reshape the practice of education. This trailblazing handbook, which offers multiple perspectives on contemplative research from some of the world's leading researchers, is a foundational text for teachers, practitioners, and policymakers working to enlarge human consciousness and cocreate a wiser, more compassionate world.

In this review, I take four steps. I (1) describe what is at stake with this handbook, (2) briefly explain how it is constructed and what its core contributions are, and (3) offer five strategic nurturances for the ongoing conversation about how to research spirituality contemplatively and grow the field of Contemplative Studies in light of some methodological vulnerabilities. This review (4) concludes with a final experimental practice in the compassionate, constructive spirit of this exceptional volume. In the end, I hope to persuade readers to begin this handbook on their own, engage with it from their hearts, and embody it with their communities of experimental practice for the benefit of Earth.

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Fundamentally, this handbook is rooted in a question. At stake is how this question is lived and answered across different academic disciplines, cultural standpoints, and spiritual traditions. The animating question of this volume accepts no one answer as definitive, encourages diverse perspectives, and holds divergent conclusions in creative tension.

> *How, today, might contemplative researchers help facilitate a more compassionate, respectful, and sustainable future?*

Three contributions coordinate the stakes of this handbook: The first is the systemization of contemporary spirituality research in applied contexts from around the world; the second is this handbook's argument that doing research contemplatively improves research because contemplative methods enable people to see the integrated, multidimensional nature of reality more clearly; and the third is the potential resonance of this project that ripples throughout education and into social revolution when a contemplative stance is cultivated, developed, and legitimated in research. As one of the editors, the brilliant Irish spirituality scholar Bernadette Flanagan writes in her introductory chapter, "it is hope, idealism, and dreams of a better society that lie behind embracing this research revolution" (3).

The contributions in this volume do not arise from a vacuum. They emerge from concrete, harrowing, and death-dealing global afflictions like hunger, homelessness, and intersecting climate catastrophes—as well as the successful, institutionalized resistances to Cartesian dualism from scholars like Carl Jung and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; the decolonial work of Franz Fanon, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks who courageously made education into practices of communal liberation; and the search for the soul of higher education in the fraught terrain of neoliberalism led by pioneering educators like Jane Dalton, Elizabeth Dorman, Kathryn Byrnes, Margaret Benefiel, and Bo Karen Lee.[1]

This handbook is 400 pages long. It is comprised of thirty-three chapters and the following seven parts: (1) Foundations, (2) Approaches to Contemplative Research, (3) Contemplative Research in Education, (4) Contemplative Research in Work and Leadership, (5) Contemplative Research in Science, Health, and Healing, (6) Contemplative Research in Social Sciences, and (7) Contemplative Research and the Way Forward.

Generally, as Flanagan outlines in her introduction, three methodologies are engaged in this volume: first-person, second-person, and third-person methods. While the boundaries between these methodologies are porous, and this three-part categorization is not meant to limit the evolving nature of contemplative research, first-, second-, and third-person methodologies are used as a heuristic framework for the remainder of this review.

First-person methodology practices in contemplative research function like a spiritual pilgrimage that transforms the researcher in their quest to better understand and care for the world. Contemplative researchers who use this approach show that there is important insight about social phenomena within a researcher's own developing, embodied consciousness. B. Alan Wallace, Parker Palmer, and Mary Frohlich are among the critical influences and pioneers for the researchers who use this approach in contemplative research within this volume—they broke through the iron barriers of positivism that treated the researcher's presence like a plague to be avoided rather than a generative field to explore.[2] Noelia Molina's chapter, "Spiritual

Autobiography as a Prelude to Contemplative Research Inquiry," is a particularly insightful illustration in this volume. Molina describes how writing a spiritual autobiography can help a researcher find their own "soul voice," become open to otherness, engage fruitfully with the unknown, and render loving epistemologies through contemplative inquiry.

For contemplative researchers working with a first-person methodology, there is a vulnerability to overlook the incalculable differences we encounter—to project our own subjectivity—and thus mistake sameness in difference. The contributors in this volume who use this methodology are aware of this vulnerability and demonstrate well the kind of radical humility that contemplative research requires. Considering the still persistent risk to conflate genuine alterity with experiential resonance, however, I encourage researchers to integrate contemplative practices of uncertainty, dissonance, and disturbance more explicitly into their research process, from start to finish. The point of contemplative disturbance in research methods is to remain vulnerable to being transformed by the different creatures and local worlds that we will never totally comprehend—but may be invited into relationship with. The late sociologist Michael Burawoy and the anthropologist Amira Mittermaier are astute conversation partners in the effort to remember alterity in research; both social scientists design research projects that explicitly challenge the allure toward theoretical finality.[3] Figures like Emmanuel Levinas and Søren Kierkegaard also help us appreciate that the othernesses we encounter, be they human or divine, need the conceptual freedom to live in the mysteries that are their arising natures.[4]

Second-person methodology focuses on contemplative research within a community; it is much less concerned about what's happening within a researcher's own consciousness. Epistemic collaboration, care, and justice with a local community are foremost. The point is to do research *with* a community, not *on* or *about* a community. A pioneer in the second-person methodology for Contemplative Studies is David Coghlan, whose lucid work on action research for Christian spirituality is available in this volume. In second-person methodology, the researcher is like a contemplative assistant of a global good—rather than someone driven to publish and politicize scholarship that may be divorced from the real, emergent values within local communities.

For the second-person methodology, the chapters by Natasha Huang and Yuria Celidwen are especially insightful. In her ethnographic fieldwork with chaplains at a community hospital, Huang learned that self-compassion created a non-anxious, trustworthy presence that allowed her research participants to bring their authentic selves more fully into the research. Skillful compassion, Huang shows, can create space in research for what is real to be seen, understood, and nurtured. Huang also demonstrates how contemplative research has the potential to be a practice of healing empowerment for research participants. The chaplains in Huang's study, we learn, were able to improve their integrative care work because of Huang's project. An entire conference and volume could further explore the relationship between contemplative research, participant experience, and social healing.

Yuria Celidwen's chapter, which is grounded in her research on bereavement remembrance with Nahua and Maya peoples, productively challenges Contemplative Studies to move further beyond first-person methodology as a practice of liberation from individualism, colonialism, and anthropocentrism. Celidwen calls contemplative researchers into a more inclusive, multidimensional engagement with the lifeforms they wish to understand—even amid the painful bewilderment of their grief, liminality, and death. Celidwen's chapter also shows that Indigenous

epistemologies can foster a more capacious ethic of belonging for environmental and human wellness.

I noticed two vulnerabilities that contemplative researchers working with a second-person methodology may encounter. The first is the vulnerability of losing one's own critical, subjective difference in the attempt to serve a perceived good within a community. The painful truth is that sometimes the communities we learn with do ugly things, violate our ethical commitments, and present us with profound ethical challenges. We have the ethical and scholarly responsibility to write about these painful truths, with love. For help with the vulnerability of losing oneself in research with a community, I commend again Molina's chapter on writing with one's soul voice—in addition to the burgeoning literature on community-engaged research from seasoned scholars like Chad Raphael and Martha Matsuoka.[5]

A second vulnerability contemplative researchers operating in second-person methodology may encounter is related to empirical evidence. Contemplative researchers may be vulnerable, that is, to forgetting that a warmhearted, contemplative compassion for a community's wellbeing also requires the cool, calculated rigor of comprehensive evidence. We need to show, with extensive evidence derived from reliable methods, that our writing was born from slow, patient attention to the messy, conflicting dance of light and shadow within a community. And readers need to feel—in their bones—that this dance really happened. When we fail to stand confidently in our own souls and remember that extensive evidence is a necessary dimension of compassionate research for positive social change, we can look to guidance from exemplary researchers like Nancy Ammerman, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and Tanya Marie Luhrmann.[6]

With a third-person methodology, a compassionate but critical distance from what is being studied is pursued. Here, it is less the researcher's "I" or the good of a communal "we" and more an integrated "they" that the contemplative researcher tries to bring into focus. Understanding cultural differences comes to the foreground in a third-person methodology. Max Weber, Margaret Mead, and Clifford Gertz are among the epistemological architects who shaped this methodology historically. In her ethnographic work on political emotion with Trump supporters in the United States, the contemporary sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild illustrates how third-person research can create "empathy bridges" across radically different local worlds to engender respect for human plurality, identify the underlying social afflictions that often push people toward spiritual practices, and facilitate the kind of healing that contemplative researchers strive for[7]. In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies*, the third-person methodology is compellingly exemplified by Louis Komjathy and Daniel Barbezat. Komjathy and Barbezat, who are the literal architects of Contemplative Studies, both attempt, each with their own differences, to reach a critical distance concerning what the field is and has been to understand and shepherd its possible futures.

In his chapter, Barbezat grapples with the pressing relationship between Contemplative Studies and artificial intelligence. In what should be required reading, Barbezat proposes that the presence of AI require contemplative researchers to examine how human biases work on AI—and how AI then works on human beings and creates something different, known and unknown, within and yet apart from us. When, for example, in December 2025, I asked a popular chatbot to create an image of God, it rendered a painting of a white bearded male in the sky, beaming with "ethereal light"—which, really, tells a story about how stereotypes infiltrate AI, influence how people may

experiment with ultimate reality, and reinforce violent social norms. So, proceed slowly, Barbezat cautions those considering using AI in contemplative research—and with the greatest humility, sociocultural sensitivity, and devotion to one's values.

Komjathy's chapter offers a wonderfully precise overview of the current state of Contemplative Studies. For the sake of the future, he challenges readers to question whether academic life can be lived contemplatively at all: If Contemplative Studies must emerge from a life that is lived contemplatively and if we should give more attention to subjects like inter-species relationality. This chapter is to be read slowly and then reread in conversation with others. Komjathy's concluding proposal about the creation of a contemplative "superschool" capable of a sustainable, efficacious challenge to higher education, like an "Interdisciplinary Contemplative Humanities Center (ICHC)," is profoundly intriguing. Indeed, have we given higher education too much power in shaping who we are and what we become? Might Contemplative Studies help the world build more liberative, wise, and compassionate alternatives?

Before I conclude this review by inviting readers into a final contemplative practice, I will offer two nurturances for the ongoing conversation about how to research spirituality contemplatively and grow the field of Contemplative Studies. These nurturances emerge from my observation that we are vulnerable to theoretical abstraction from working too far apart from each other—and vulnerable also to the unintended harm our work may cause in the noble attempt to reshape education. Together, using Komjathy and Barbezat's chapters, I invite contemplative researchers (1) to collaborate on a shared research project to refine the differences that Contemplation Studies can make and (2) to explore, through a conference panel and journal series, the haunting possibility that, like any field of knowledge and practice, Contemplative Studies may never break away from the violences it wishes to liberate the world from—and that we must each, therefore, explore together how to integrate contemplative research practices like confession, forgiveness, and recreation into the fabric of our fallible methods.

First, I encourage readers to dream openheartedly with Komjathy about an Interdisciplinary Contemplative Humanities Center. Komjathy's envisioned center would privilege the humanities, preserve autonomy from corporate influence, and foreground contemplative living. Given that several contemplative centers already exist (like the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia), I suggest that Komjathy's center could develop a complementary social identity and harmonious contribution by gathering researchers from around the world to study one of the social afflictions that Flanagan suggests brought the contemplative research revolution into existence. Could a multi-year, interdisciplinary, contemplative study of global homelessness, as one example, yield insights that might help people find, feel, and create a compassionate home with human and nonhuman life? What differences might a shared project and focused study with diverse scholars make for Contemplative Studies?

Finally, I encourage readers—whatever they choose to study, using whatever emerging methodology, whether alone or together—to wed themselves irrevocably to the kind of epistemological humility and value-commitment that Barbezat pleads for in his chapter. Pathbreaking figures like Gillian Rose can remind us that no epistemology, even with a seemingly prosocial name like "contemplative," can break totally free from the possibilities of violence—even though, very preciously, very beautifully, and with very serious risk, we can do "love's work" failingly in "the broken middle."[8] Indeed, have we grappled well with our capacity for

contemplative harm—with how deeply the fangs of violence dig their teeth into us as we struggle through research for the good, the true, and the beautiful? And when inevitably we fail, how might we cocreate generative research methods of confession, forgiveness, and recreation?

The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies deserves a prominent place in classrooms, spiritual communities, and libraries around the world. As it is read and engaged, prayed and practiced, I am optimistic that its animating dream of creating a more compassionate and respectful world through a contemplative research revolution will become a concrete reality. But even if this revolution doesn't make every difference it hopes for, it is a transformative, empowering experience to read the beautiful work that its contributors have done—and witness the small revolutions already taking place in hearts, minds, and small communities around the world. By way of conclusion, I invite you to read each contributor's name slowly, thank them for their work, and wish them well.

> Heesoon Bai. Daniel Barbezat. Larisa Bardsley. Valerie Malhotra Bentz. Barbara Bickel. Vicki Bouvier. Deborah Breede. Yuria Celidwen. Kerri Clough. David Coghlan. Avraham Cohen. Renata Cueto de Souza. Jorge N. Ferrer. Bernadette Flanagan. George Fragakis. Vincenzo M.B. Giorgino. Sabine Grunwald. Maureen P. Hall. Natasha Huang. Cheryl Hunt. Maria Kefalogianni. Louis Komjathy. Krzysztof T. Konecki. Lars-Gunnar Lundh. Mary Ellen Lynch. Jennifer MacDonald. James Marlatt. Nicholas J. Matiasz. Noelia Molina. Sudip Patra. Giovanni Rossini. Charles Scott. Naresh Singh. Olga R. Sohmer. Christopher Staab, SJ. Nevine Sultan. Natasha Tassell-Matamua. Tara Travers. Elmor Van Staden. John Vervaeke. Greg Walkerden. B. Alan Wallace. Heather Williams. Allen Yee. Aizaiah G. Yong.

NOTES

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[7] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016; *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* (The New Press, 2024).
[8] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (New York Review Books, 2011).