

## Kim Knott's Methodological Rapprochement: From Complete Participant to Complete Observer in Islamic Studies

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### Abstract

This article explores Islamic studies from the insider/outsider perspective proposed by Kim Knott. It focuses on the researcher's identity and the theoretical framework underlying insider and outsider approaches, as well as the implications of their application in contemporary Islamic studies. This approach integrates three key elements: active participation in the studied religious community (complete participant), the role of the researcher in conducting objective observation (complete observer), and the dialogical relationship between emic and etic approaches in the analysis of religion, which Kim Knott conceptualizes as *rapprochement*. This implies that religious research requires a dynamic adjustment between the role of a community member and that of a neutral researcher. The article concludes that the *rapprochement* approach developed by Kim Knott establishes a more inclusive and dialogical framework in Islamic studies, promoting deeper understanding of Islamic religion and culture and creating space for more meaningful discussion and mutual understanding among the parties involved in religious research. Furthermore, it argues that the insider/outsider perspective offers a rich and multidimensional approach to understanding Islam. By integrating participatory perspectives, objective research, and emic-etic analysis, this approach enables researchers to develop a more comprehensive and dialogical understanding of Islam in contemporary contexts.

### KATA KUNCI:

Perspektif Kim Knott,  
Identitas *Insider/Outsider*,  
Kerangka Teoretik Studi  
Islam, *Rapprochement*

### Abstrak

Artikel ini menggali pendekatan studi Islam dari perspektif *insider/outsider* yang diajukan oleh Kim Knott. Fokusnya adalah pada identitas peneliti dan kerangka teoretik yang digunakan dalam pendekatan *insider* dan *outsider*, serta implikasi yang timbul dari penerapannya dalam studi Islam kontemporer. Pendekatan tersebut mengintegrasikan tiga elemen penting: partisipasi aktif dalam agama yang diteliti (*complete participant*), peran sebagai peneliti dalam pengamatan obyektif (*complete observer*), dan hubungan dialogis pendekatan emik dan etik dalam analisis agama yang disebut oleh Kim Knott dengan *rapprochement*. Artinya, penelitian agama memerlukan penyesuaian dinamis antara peran sebagai anggota komunitas agama dan peran sebagai peneliti netral. Artikel ini menghasilkan kesimpulan bahwa bagaimana pendekatan *rapprochement* yang digagas oleh Kim Knott menciptakan kerangka kerja yang lebih inklusif dan dialogis dalam studi Islam, mempromosikan pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang agama dan budaya Islam, serta menciptakan ruang untuk diskusi yang lebih mendalam dan saling pengertian antara berbagai pihak yang terlibat dalam penelitian agama. Selain itu, artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan studi Islam perspektif *insider/outsider* menawarkan pendekatan yang kaya dan multidimensional untuk memahami agama Islam. Hal ini membantu peneliti memahami agama dengan lebih baik melalui perspektif partisipan, penelitian obyektif, dan analisis emik dan etik. Implikasinya adalah terciptanya pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif dan dialogis tentang agama Islam dalam konteks kontemporer.

## INTRODUCTION

The insider/outsider approach in Islamic studies acknowledges the complexity of identity, experience, and individual understanding within the context of Islamic scholarship (Seise, 2019). Research conducted by insider scholars, namely those with an Islamic background, and outsider scholars, namely those who are not part of the Muslim community, has provided valuable insights into how understandings of Islam may vary. This highlights the importance of recognizing the role of identity in Islamic studies research and its impact on research outcomes (Vahed, 2021). Nevertheless, Kim Knott offers a different perspective on insider and outsider identities in Islamic studies (Hinnells, 2005).

Initially, the terms “insider” and “outsider” in the context of Islamic studies research were often interpreted dichotomously, with researchers from Muslim communities regarded as insiders, and those from outside the community, especially Western scholars or Orientalists, identified as outsiders (Muliadi, 2022). However, over time, Kim Knott recognized that this understanding is far more complex. Today, insider or outsider status in Islamic studies is no longer determined solely by a researcher’s personal background, but rather by the approaches and methodologies they employ, as well as the implications of their research (Hinnells, 2005).

Most importantly, the insider/outsider approach highlights the diversity of theoretical frameworks used in Islamic research. This approach not only considers the researcher’s personal background but also critically examines the theories, research methods, and analytical perspectives used to explore Islam (Alamin et al., 2024; Anam et al., 2024). It enables scholars to synthesize and compare various theoretical frameworks employed by insider and outsider researchers in understanding Islamic dynamics (Saleh, 2014) (Abdullah, 2014). In this way, the insider/outsider approach offers a more inclusive and contextualized perspective on Islam and emphasizes the significance of theoretical frameworks in shaping interpretation and analysis (Gleig, 2012). Variations in these frameworks have important implications for Islamic studies, as they may influence research findings and scholarly contributions to the overall understanding of Islam.

The implications of the insider/outsider approach in Islamic studies are both relevant and significant. One of its major contributions is its potential to generate deeper and more nuanced understandings of Islam, which Kim Knott refers to as “rapprochement” (Amrulloh et al., 2020). By involving researchers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, this approach provides more comprehensive insights into the complex dynamics of Islam. For example, insider researchers may contribute personal experiences and cultural contexts to their studies, while outsider researchers may offer more detached perspectives that support critical textual analysis and interpretation (Nurcholis, 2021). Beyond deepening understanding, the insider/outsider approach also has the potential to challenge stereotypes and prejudices that frequently emerge in discourses on Islam.

By breaking conventional boundaries and creating spaces for cross-cultural dialogue, this approach facilitates the exploration of multiple dimensions of Islam that are often oversimplified or misunderstood in public discourse (Knott, 2008b). This has important implications for reducing intercultural tensions and promoting mutual understanding among diverse communities. In addition to its impact on knowledge and dialogue, the insider/outsider approach also carries significant practical implications. In political and social contexts, inclusive and in-depth research on Islam can provide stronger foundations for informed decision-making and more context-sensitive policies (Knott, 2021). For instance, in international relations, improved understanding

of Islam can contribute to more effective diplomatic strategies. At the social level, it can strengthen interreligious integration and harmony in multicultural societies.

Thus, the insider/outsider approach in Islamic studies is not only academically relevant but also has far-reaching implications for fostering deeper understanding, overcoming stereotypes, and encouraging positive change across various social and policy domains. It reflects the importance of inclusive approaches to Islamic studies in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. This perspective also responds to Kim Knott's concerns regarding the scientific rigor of Islamic studies (Hinnells, 2005). Knott observes a degree of stagnation in methodologies and approaches among scholars and practitioners in the study of religion. On the one hand, they are expected to analyze religion from an academic perspective, while on the other, they must continue to respect its transcendent dimensions.

Although previous studies have discussed insider and outsider positions in Islamic Studies, a significant research gap remains. The study by Louise Ryan, Eleonore Kofman, and Pauline Aaron (Ryan et al., 2011) in *Insiders and Outsiders: Working with Peer Researchers in Researching Muslim Communities* highlights the complexity of positionality in Muslim communities, while Untung Khoiruddin (Khoiruddin, 2013) in *Insider/Outsider Perspective in Religions and Islamic Studies* maps Kim Knott's four categories of researcher roles. Similarly, Aisha Giwa (Giwa, 2015) in *Insider/Outsider Issues for Development Researchers from the Global South* criticizes the rigid insider-outsider dichotomy and emphasizes shifting identities, sub-identities, and situated reflexivity among researchers from the Global South. However, these studies remain limited to describing positionality and reflexivity without formulating a methodological model that explains how researchers can move systematically between insider and outsider positions. Therefore, the research gap of this article lies in the absence of a comprehensive analysis of Kim Knott's methodological rapprochement as an intersubjective continuum from complete participant to complete observer in Islamic studies. This article fills that gap by demonstrating how such movement can become a methodological basis for more reflexive, dialogical, and context-sensitive research on Islam.

Strong methodological competence is therefore required to analyze specific religious meanings, organize them into coherent structures and systems, and subsequently interpret them as more general religious patterns (Knott, 2008a). Accordingly, this article aims to examine the insider/outsider approach in Islamic studies, explore theoretical frameworks based on researcher identity, analyze the methodologies employed, and evaluate the implications of this approach. In doing so, the article seeks to provide in-depth insights into how the insider/outsider perspective can enrich understandings of Islam while highlighting both the challenges and opportunities inherent in this field of research.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design to examine Kim Knott's insider/outsider perspective and its relevance to Islamic Studies (Glassner & Corzine, 1982). The primary data consist of Knott's major works on complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, complete observer, in-between space, and methodological rapprochement. Secondary data are drawn from books and journal articles discussing insider-outsider debates, including works by Louise Ryan, Eleonore Kofman, Pauline Aaron, Untung Khoiruddin, and Aisha Giwa. Data were collected through documentation techniques by identifying, selecting, and recording relevant literature from books, accredited journals, and indexed databases (N & J, 2007).

In total, 38 sources were initially identified, consisting of 11 books and 27 journal articles. After a reduction process based on thematic relevance, theoretical contribution, publication credibility, and direct relation to Kim Knott's framework, 18 sources were selected for in-depth analysis, comprising 5 books and 13 journal articles.

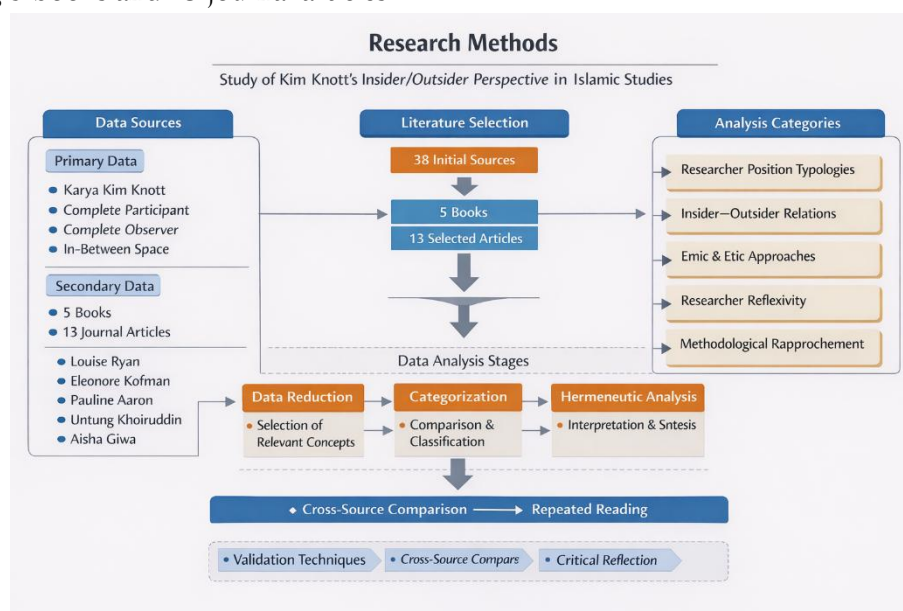


Figure 1. Research Methods

Sources that only discussed insider–outsider issues in general terms without addressing researcher positionality, methodological rapprochement, or their implications for Islamic studies were excluded. The selected literature was then organized into several analytical categories: typologies of researcher position, insider–outsider relations, emic and etic approaches, researcher reflexivity, and methodological rapprochement(Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, categorization, and interpretative-hermeneutic analysis. First, concepts and arguments directly related to the research problem were selected. Second, the data were compared to identify similarities, differences, and limitations in previous studies. Third, interpretative-hermeneutic analysis was employed to explain how movement from complete participant to complete observer can function as an intersubjective continuum in Islamic studies research(Creswell et al., 2007). The validity of the findings was strengthened through cross-source comparison, repeated reading of key texts, and critical reflection on the researcher's own positionality in interpreting the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### Emic and Etic Approaches in Examining the Insider/Outsider Perspective

The emic and etic approaches are important concepts in the social sciences, particularly in cultural anthropology, as they help explain how researchers understand and investigate human behavior and beliefs across different cultures (Mostowlansky & Rota, 2020). These two terms offer distinct perspectives on how cultural phenomena can be approached and interpreted (Morris et al., 1999). The emic approach refers to an internal perspective, namely descriptions and understandings derived directly from members of a particular culture (Morey & Luthans, 1984). It represents a more subjective and in-depth viewpoint on how cultural participants perceive and

explain their own behaviors, beliefs, and practices. The emic perspective emphasizes internal meanings, allowing individuals or groups within a culture to articulate their own interpretations of life. Emic-based research therefore seeks to approach culture in a more sensitive and nuanced manner by paying close attention to the values and worldviews held by its members.

In contrast, the etic approach refers to an external perspective, namely representations developed by observers or researchers who come from outside the culture being studied. This perspective is more detached and analytical, as it reflects an outsider's viewpoint that may include evaluation, comparison, and interpretation (Beals et al., 2020). More broadly, the etic perspective represents the standpoint of those who are not members of the culture under investigation. Etic-based research attempts to examine cultural phenomena in a more objective and systematic manner, seeking general patterns, similarities, and differences across cultures.

The distinction between emic and etic perspectives creates a balanced analytical framework in anthropological research. The emic approach enables researchers to gain deeper insights into individual experiences and internal cultural meanings, while the etic approach provides a more analytical lens for identifying broader patterns and tendencies (Feleppa, 1986). In practice, successful research often integrates both perspectives. The emic approach helps researchers understand the values and worldviews held by cultural participants, whereas the etic approach facilitates cross-cultural comparison and theoretical generalization (Jorion, 1983). Combining these approaches allows for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the culture under study.

Kenneth L. Pike offers a highly relevant perspective on the distinction between emic and etic viewpoints in cultural anthropology. He argues that the etic perspective involves a subsequent effort by observers to organize, systematize, compare, and redescribe descriptive data according to analytical frameworks of their own construction. As he states, "The etic perspective is the observer's subsequent attempt to take the descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare—in a word, redescribe—that information in terms of a system of their own making" (Pike, 1967). In this sense, the etic perspective represents an interpretative and analytical process through which researchers, as external observers, explain cultural phenomena based on their own conceptual frameworks. Consequently, the etic approach tends to be more objective and comparative in nature, as it situates cultural practices within broader analytical categories.

By contrast, the emic perspective originates directly from cultural insiders and reflects how members of a community understand and interpret their own behaviors, beliefs, and practices (Whitaker, 2017). It emphasizes lived experience and culturally embedded meanings, thereby offering a more subjective and context-sensitive account. The interaction between emic and etic perspectives generates an important dynamic in anthropological research. While the emic approach provides deeper insight into internal viewpoints, the etic approach enables researchers to develop more general and comparative analyses (Chen, 2010). When combined thoughtfully, these two perspectives contribute to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of cultural phenomena. The etic approach strengthens analytical rigor, while the emic approach ensures sensitivity to local meanings and values. Together, they form a robust methodological framework for interpreting and explaining cultural and religious life.

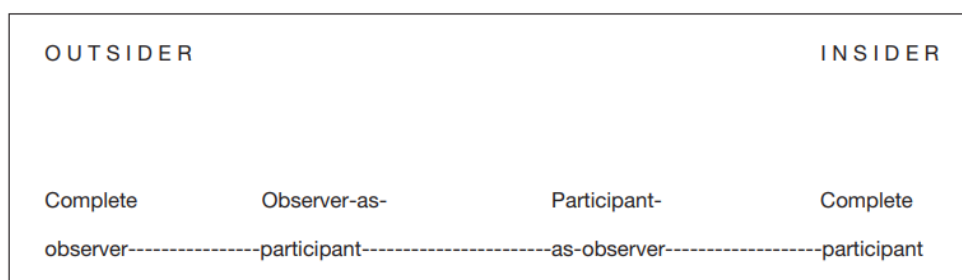
### Insider/Outsider Identity

In simple terms, researchers in religious studies within the insider/outsider framework are commonly understood as those who belong to the religious community being studied (insiders) and those who come from outside that community (outsiders). However, Kim Knott offers a more nuanced view of these identities. A researcher who belongs to a particular religious tradition is not automatically considered an insider if their analytical framework involves critical self-reflection and rigorous scholarly critique. Conversely, a researcher from outside the religious community is not necessarily an outsider if their research demonstrates empathy and deep engagement with the subject matter (Hinnells, 2005).

Russell McCutcheon (1999) makes a significant contribution to this discussion by categorizing the possible responses of individuals involved in religious studies, whether as insiders or outsiders, into three interrelated dimensions. The first is the dimension of “autonomy of religious experience,” which refers to a phenomenological approach that prioritizes understanding individual religious experience independently of theological or analytical judgments. This approach emphasizes how personal and unique religious experiences shape one’s understanding of religion and seeks to capture subjective and in-depth perspectives. The second dimension is “reductionism,” which reflects a scientific attitude that analyzes religious phenomena through critical and analytical frameworks. This approach employs empirical and methodological tools to explain religious practices in more general and systematic terms, often adopting a more skeptical stance (McCutcheon, 2023). The third dimension, “neutrality and methodological agnosticism,” refers to an approach that adopts an open and impartial stance toward diverse religious perspectives (McCutcheon, 2003). Ninian Smart (1973) exemplifies this position by approaching religion primarily from an outsider perspective, thereby enabling scholars to understand religious truth claims without endorsing or rejecting them. This reflects a shift from traditional theological approaches toward more philosophical and pluralistic frameworks.

McCutcheon’s model illustrates the complexity of religious studies and highlights the importance of considering multiple analytical dimensions. It contributes to a broader methodological framework that integrates personal experience, critical analysis, and openness to diverse perspectives. In contrast to McCutcheon, Kim Knott proposes a more detailed classification of insider and outsider positions, consisting of four categories: complete participant, complete observer, observer-as-participant, and participant-as-observer (Hinnells, 2005). Each of these positions entails distinct methodological implications and produces different forms of scholarly objectivity in the study of religion.

The category of complete participant is illustrated by Kim Knott through the example of Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim feminist sociologist whose work on women in Islam reflects a deeply emic perspective. In her study *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991), Mernissi critically examined gender relations within Islamic traditions from her position as a believing Muslim woman. Her work faced strong opposition from conservative scholars who questioned her authority and legitimacy. Nevertheless, her research opened space for more inclusive and contextual interpretations of Islam and demonstrated how insider researchers can challenge dominant norms while remaining rooted in their religious identity. According to Knott, Mernissi represents a prototype of the emic approach, emphasizing internal meanings, personal experience, and culturally embedded interpretations (Hinnells, 2005).



In contrast, the complete observer position represents researchers who study religion from outside the community and rely primarily on etic approaches. These scholars emphasize objectivity, neutrality, and methodological rigor, often drawing on social-scientific and psychological methods to analyze religious experience (Knott, 2008a). Key principles guiding this position include freedom from personal bias, impartiality toward competing religious perspectives, and mutual scholarly consultation. Many complete observers employ quantitative methods, such as surveys and statistical analysis, to examine religious beliefs and practices empirically. While this approach strengthens analytical precision, it may also intensify the distance between researchers and religious communities, reinforcing power imbalances and limiting empathetic engagement. As a result, complete observers often face challenges in maintaining genuine neutrality and avoiding unintended bias.

The observer-as-participant position refers to researchers who originate outside a religious community but seek to understand it through empathetic involvement. Knott associates this approach with earlier phenomenological traditions represented by scholars such as Kristensen, Van der Leeuw, and Ninian Smart. This position attempts to bridge the insider–outsider divide by combining scholarly distance with experiential engagement. Eileen Barker argues that religious research should not be confined to external analysis but must involve immersion in lived religious practices. Similarly, Cornelius Tiele distinguished between individual religious subjectivity and scholarly impartiality, emphasizing the need for balance between personal experience and academic neutrality. Although this framework has been influential, it remains controversial, as it may implicitly privilege outsider objectivity over insider subjectivity.

The participant-as-observer position illustrates the struggles of researchers who belong to the religious community they study while also seeking scholarly objectivity. Kim Knott exemplifies this position through the work of Samuel Heilman, who experienced tension between his identity as a member of the Orthodox Jewish community and his role as a sociologist. Heilman attempted to compartmentalize his personal experiences while employing social-scientific language to maintain analytical distance. He also used broader terms such as “tradition,” “culture,” and “liturgy” to interpret religious practices beyond their internal terminology. This approach reflects the ongoing negotiation between personal involvement and academic detachment that characterizes insider scholarship.

Debates surrounding insider and outsider identities emphasize the need for reflective and rational engagement with one’s positionality. Heilman’s experience illustrates how personal affiliation can generate methodological tension, while scholars such as Pearson stress the importance of critical self-awareness in managing this tension. Collins further argues that the insider–outsider distinction becomes less relevant when all participants are recognized as equal contributors to knowledge production. This perspective encourages a move away from rigid dichotomies toward more dynamic and collaborative models of religious scholarship (Hinnells,

2005). Mandair et al. (2013) extend this view by emphasizing self-discovery and identity formation as central dimensions of religious research.

Overall, scholars in religious studies continuously explore the relationships between belief and reality, the sacred and the profane, and transcendence and history. While phenomenological approaches have advanced understanding of religious experience, they have also revealed limitations in capturing the full complexity of religiosity (Blum, 2012). Consequently, contemporary scholars increasingly seek critical and interdisciplinary approaches that integrate historical, cultural, and social perspectives. Within this evolving landscape, the insider/outsider framework remains a crucial tool for examining how researcher identity shapes knowledge production in the study of religion.

### **Theoretical Framework of Religious Studies from the Insider/Outsider Perspective**

Kim Knott identifies two key issues in mapping approaches to religious studies that reflect her concerns within the academic framework. First, she highlights the difficulty of clearly defining the boundaries between what constitutes religion and what does not. Second, she points to the complexity of understanding religion as both tradition and faith (Woodhead et al., 2016). In her effort to address these challenges, Knott draws on the works of earlier scholars, including Kristensen, Van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Wilfred C. Smith, Cornelius Tiele, Kenneth Pike, and Ninian Smart. Through this engagement with existing literature, she succeeds in mapping various approaches to religious studies. Her academic contribution is particularly valuable in offering a framework to address methodological and conceptual problems in academic institutions, especially universities, in the study and analysis of religion.

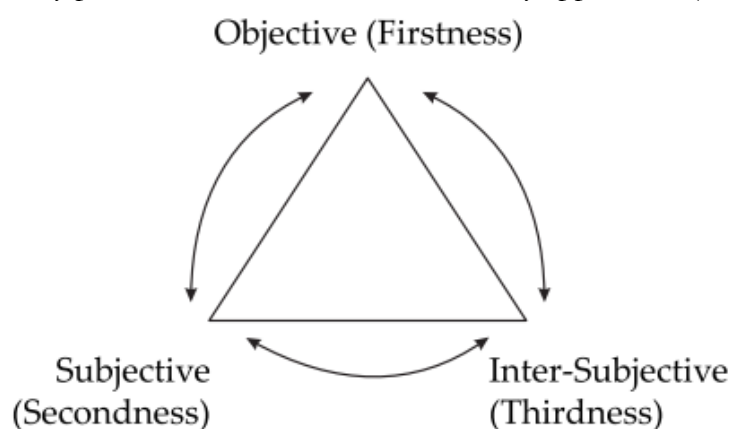
Beyond its academic significance, the framework developed by Kim Knott provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of religion by integrating two important dimensions: the historical-empirical and the normative-theological (Martin, 1988). By examining religion through these dual perspectives, scholars can gain deeper insights into its complexity in everyday life while situating it within broader theological contexts. Consequently, Knott's work has had a significant positive impact on the development of religious studies and on general understandings of religion.

Kim Knott proposes an approach that involves complex interactions between insiders and outsiders in the study of religion. In this framework, the religious experiences of insiders, namely individuals who have personal affiliations with particular religious traditions, serve as the starting point of the research process. These experiences include in-depth understandings of religious practices, beliefs, and cultural contexts (Saleh, 2014). At the same time, outsiders, who are often positioned as researchers with more objective and analytical perspectives, contribute comparative and critical analyses of these insider experiences (Hinnells, 2005). This approach therefore establishes a framework that negotiates the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity in understanding religion. Outsiders respond empathetically to insider experiences while maintaining the analytical distance necessary for scholarly rigor.

The interaction between insiders and outsiders creates a balanced perspective in the historical development of religious studies. Insiders contribute contextualized and experiential knowledge, while outsiders provide systematic analytical frameworks. Collaboration between these positions enables a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of religion. Through this exchange, religious studies becomes more diverse, inclusive, and intellectually productive, facilitating richer interpretations of religion in various cultural and historical contexts. Thus, Knott's approach generates a constructive dynamic that integrates the strengths of internal and

external perspectives and enriches the study of religion in an increasingly interconnected global society.

Kim Knott's perspective contrasts with several other scholarly positions, including that of Darshan Singh (1991), who argues that religious concepts and doctrines are not easily accessible to non-adherents. According to Singh, genuine religious understanding can only be achieved through deep participation in religious practices. Similarly, Knott's approach differs from that of Charles S. Peirce, who identifies several key elements shaping religious understanding. These include belief, which reflects strong moral and social structures; habit of mind, which refers to inherited traditions and patterns of thought; and doubt, which stimulates critical questioning of established religious assumptions. Peirce argues that scholars must pass through stages of tenacity, authority, a priori reasoning, and inquiry in order to achieve reflective belief. The stage of inquiry emphasizes meaning rather than absolute truth and reflects a pragmatic theory of interpretation, while the logic of theory provides the foundation for scholarly application (Munitz, 1981).



A crucial and persistent dilemma in religious studies concerns how researchers can maintain objectivity and neutrality, whether as insiders or outsiders. Kim Knott addresses this challenge through the concept of *rapprochement*, which emphasizes openness and mutual engagement (Fajar & Maghribi, 2021). This approach, developed in her work on Islam and conversion for the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), can be understood through the following triadic framework:

*Table 1. Characteristics of the Three Dimensions*

| <b>SUBJECTIVE</b>                                    | <b>OBJECTIVE</b>                                                    | <b>INTER-SUBJECTIVE</b>                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The word of faith (insider perspective of believers) | The word of scholarship (outsider or pure researcher perspective)   | The word of <i>rapprochement</i> (dialogical perspective of insiders and outsiders) |
| Belief (based on faith)                              | Impartiality (based on data reduction and analytical understanding) | Dialogical exchange of ideas (integration of insider beliefs and outsider findings) |
| Fideist/Theistic (theological orientation)           | Objective rationality (rational and objective orientation)          | Reflexivity (reflective orientation)                                                |
| Emic/Insider                                         | Etic/Outsider                                                       | Circular                                                                            |

The *rapprochement* approach in religious studies represents an effort to construct an intersubjective solution. Its primary aim is to position researchers within a “margin of appreciation,” understood as the boundary between insider and outsider roles (Knott, 2008a). This approach acknowledges the distinction between these positions and does not require researchers to fully merge them. Instead, it encourages scholars to identify points of convergence, even if limited, while maintaining awareness of their distinct roles. Researchers are expected to recognize their personal religious commitments while simultaneously upholding scholarly objectivity and neutrality (Asnawan, 2018).

Through this framework, the perspectives of researchers as believing individuals and as neutral scholars are recognized and integrated within the research process. This enables greater methodological flexibility, allowing scholars to combine personal depth of understanding with rigorous analytical standards. In essence, the *rapprochement* approach seeks to integrate essential elements of both insider and outsider positions, producing a more dynamic and complex framework for studying religion. It acknowledges the inherent complexity of religious realities and therefore promotes more inclusive and nuanced research methodologies.

The approach proposed by Kim Knott ultimately represents an alternative model that emphasizes balance and dialogue among the key elements of religious research. She argues that insiders, outsiders, and research subjects should not be viewed as isolated or hierarchically ordered entities, but rather as interconnected components within a reflective and circular relationship (Vásquez & Knott, 2014). The central spirit of this approach is the creation of shared understanding rather than the dissolution of religious differences. By fostering dialogical engagement, it enables deeper interreligious and intercultural understanding without erasing distinctive identities.

In its intersubjective dimension, Knott conceptualizes *rapprochement* as an accommodative and dialogical instrument that encourages openness and inclusivity in religious research (Mellor, 2004). Researchers are invited to approach their subjects with respect, empathy, and critical awareness, seeking common ground while remaining attentive to difference. Nevertheless, despite its emphasis on dialogue and inclusivity, the *rapprochement* approach faces ongoing challenges in achieving objectivity. Researchers must continuously negotiate the tension between personal belief and scholarly detachment. Given the deeply personal nature of religious commitments, maintaining objectivity remains a complex task. As a result, scholars must remain reflexive and methodologically vigilant in order to preserve academic rigor while facilitating meaningful dialogue across religious perspectives.

## Discussion

The *rapprochement* approach in religious studies, particularly in Islamic studies as developed by Kim Knott, represents an effort to create an intersubjective solution for understanding truth in the study of religion and Islam. Its primary aim is to position researchers within a “margin of appreciation,” which can be understood as the boundary between insider and outsider roles in religious research. When applied to Islamic studies, this approach seeks to foster a balanced and dialogical form of understanding, as envisioned by Knott.

Based on Knott's perspective, Islamic studies should be closely connected to intersubjective relationships involving researchers, research subjects (insiders), and research objects (religion or religious communities). The need to develop more sensitive and inclusive relationships has gained strong support, replacing the traditional subject–object model in which researchers functioned as

outsiders while religious communities were treated merely as insiders or objects of study. This new approach offers a more contextually relevant solution and demonstrates how religious research must take into account the diversity of perspectives and religious understandings.

In this context, empathy and respect play a central role. These attitudes serve as essential foundations when researchers position themselves as active participants in their studies, or in Kim Knott's terms, as "complete participants." This means that researchers seek to embrace the views, beliefs, and experiences of their research subjects with openness, without prejudice, and with deep respect for religious diversity. Such a dialogical approach illustrates how contemporary Islamic studies increasingly involve deeper engagement between scholars and the religious communities they study. Fazlur Rahman reflects this dialogical orientation by emphasizing the importance of understanding religious norms, values, and worldviews within their historical, cultural, and social contexts. Detailed inquiry into Islamic values is no longer viewed merely as an external observation but as an effort to enter and engage with religious understanding from within.

This approach also creates opportunities for researchers to involve religious communities as partners in the research process. It not only enables deeper and more contextual perspectives on religion but also allows communities to articulate their own beliefs and practices, thereby contributing to more balanced scholarly interpretations. As Rahman states:

"The investigating subject should not be inimical to or prejudiced against the object of his or her study, in this case Islam, but rather be open-minded and, if possible, empathically attuned" (Martin, 1988).

Accordingly, intersubjective relationships in Islamic studies constitute an essential step toward more profound and contextualized understandings of Islamic religion and culture. The framework established through this approach creates an inclusive environment that encourages productive dialogue among researchers, outsiders, and insider religious communities. The rapprochement framework supports richer interpretations of Islam by emphasizing the historical, cultural, and social contexts that shape religious understanding. Research that builds strong relationships with religious communities provides scholars with deeper access to believers' thoughts and experiences, enabling them to perceive religion from within. This helps prevent generalizations and stereotypes that often arise in studies conducted by external researchers who lack in-depth religious familiarity.

Furthermore, this framework creates space for more substantive discussion and more meaningful dialogue. Religious communities involved in research feel respected and heard, making them more willing to participate actively and share their perspectives. This fosters open dialogue in which diverse viewpoints can be articulated and understood more clearly. As a result, research becomes more inclusive and encourages constructive intellectual exchange. The rapprochement approach in Islamic studies not only facilitates deeper and more relevant understanding but also strengthens dialogical engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article finds that, according to Kim Knott, insider and outsider identities in religious research can be classified into four categories: complete participant, complete observer, observer as participant, and participant as observer, each of which carries distinct methodological implications for producing scholarly objectivity in the study of religion. From these positions, Knott develops the rapprochement model as an intersubjective

solution that places researchers within a “margin of appreciation” between insider and outsider roles, requiring them to distinguish their personal religious commitments from their professional obligations as scholars committed to neutrality and objectivity. In the context of Islamic studies, this approach offers an important epistemological and methodological contribution by shifting the field beyond the rigid insider–outsider dichotomy toward a more reflexive, dialogical, and relational model of knowledge production. The rapprochement framework enables the integration of emic perspectives from Muslim communities with etic scholarly analysis, thereby fostering more contextual, inclusive, and comprehensive interpretations of Islam as a lived and culturally embedded reality. At the same time, it underscores the importance of researcher reflexivity, encouraging scholars to critically examine their own positionality and assumptions in the research process. Consequently, this approach provides a theoretical foundation for the future development of Islamic studies that is more participatory, ethically responsible, and capable of bridging normative religious understanding with critical academic inquiry.

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