The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Thomas Peterson, Alfred University, Chair), sponsors Spotlight on Teaching. It appears twice each year in Religious Studies News, AAR Edition as a special pullout section focusing on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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University of Hartford Editor.

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is no single representative body for theology and religious studies that corresponds to the AAR, finding this information and tracking down contacts has been time-consuming. It has involved searching through the individual web sites of British universities, colleges, and related bodies.

This edition of Spotlight on Teaching introduces a new project that, among other things, offers a one-stop site for access to the whole field of theology and religious studies in Britain. The project is particularly concerned to foster the communication of effective practice in teaching and learning. The new site is administered by the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network, or PRS-LTSN. Links to all the British institutions teaching theology and religious studies, and to British colleagues teaching in a particular field, are available at http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk.

The site also offers discussion groups, web-based publications, and news of conferences. It offers a new possibility for sharing best practice and teaching learning, not just within Britain, but between Britain and the rest of the world. In the following pages, we hope to introduce this project to you and to suggest some topics this new dialogue might cover.

The web site is the most accessible part of the LTSN, but behind it is a great deal of other activity. LTSN offers workshops for teachers involved in particular subjects or facing particular problems. Research projects into topics such as the use of Web material in teaching, the problems of particular disadvantaged student groups, and creative ways to deal with increasing student numbers, are sponsored by the PRS-LTSN. We are shortly to launch a journal to provide a forum for publication of such material. The aim of the PRS-LTSN is to bring about a change of culture so that talking and writing about teaching becomes as accepted a part of the life of academics as the discussion of research. We are delighted to offer readers of Religious Studies News an invitation to learn more about the PRS-LTSN’s work, and to become involved in the exciting possibilities of pooling resources and teaching strategies internationally.

Some issues are specific to the British situation, of course, but the basic problems of teaching students to think creatively in these subjects, and of finding and assessing teaching materials to use, cross national boundaries. Common problems exist, for instance, in coming to terms with the proper use of the Internet, the changing educational environment of students at the school level, and the tension between teachers’ independence and the need to ensure proper standards. Broadening the dialogue can only help us all. The PRS-LTSN has already benefited from strong links with the Wabash Center for Teaching Theology and Religion based at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana. The two bodies are co-operating in a Special Session at this year’s AAR/SBL Annual Meeting. The Teaching and Learning Committee of the AAR has been very supportive, and the possibilities of exchange are very promising.

This edition falls into six sections, written by a variety of people involved with the LTSN and its work. Together, they give a window into the teaching of theology and religious studies in Britain today. We hope to explain some of the characteristic features of the educational traditions and systems in Britain in a way that may give food for thought for those in other countries — whether as a source of inspiration or as a cautionary tale.

We begin with a general description of the PRS-LTSN and its purposes written by Hugh Pyper, the Associate Director of the Centre with special responsibility for theology and religious studies. He is also Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the University of Leeds. We then move on to Denise Cush’s discussion of teaching religion at school level in Britain, which has some important differences from the situation in the United States. Gary Bunt addresses the role of the Internet in British religious studies education. This is followed by three personal views on teaching religious studies and theology in modern Britain. The first is by Dr Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad of the University of Lancaster, the second by Professor David Ferguson of the University of Edinburgh, and the third by Bill Campbell, Associate Director of the PRS-LTSN in Lampeter.

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An Introduction to the Philosophical and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network (PRS-LTSN)

Hugh Pyper, University of Leeds

T he PHILOSOPHICAL and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network (PRS-LTSN) aims to provide a service to 24 subject central networks covering the range of subjects studied at the university level. The LTSN centres have been set up by the public bodies that administer funding for higher education in Great Britain. They were launched in 1999 and became fully operational in 2000. The centres cover every- thing from engineering to media studies. These subject centres — together with a Central Centre that focuses on teaching across subject boundaries — are co-ordinated by an executive based in York. A central web site at http://www.ltsn.ac.uk gives access to all the centres of the network. These aims include becoming the primary information and advice resource for academics and related staff and actively seeking to import and export information and resources internationally.

This teaching initiative comes at a time of rapid increase in the number of students in higher education — an increase that has been especially felt in the humanities and the need for academics to reflect on how this impacts on their teaching. Almost all higher education institutions in Britain are funded by the government, which means both that government has a direct interest in the quality of teaching provision, and that there is a need to measure and monitor the outcomes of this teaching provision under the auspices of the separate Quality Assurance Agency. There is a real consensus that the emphasis on teaching as an aspect of the academic role is the route to improvements in quality and student satisfaction.

As part of this wider development, the Philosophical and Religious Studies LTSN centre (PRS-LTSN) was set up in 1999. It is one of the joint ventures established in Britain, situated in a thriving city with a long industrial past and a very religious and ethnically diverse population. In large and successful Theological and Religious studies depart- ments, such as PRS-LTSN, there is always the need to share expertise and good practice.

The Subject Centre’s Activities

The purpose of the Subject Centre is to promote and communicate good practice in subject specific teaching activities. This raises an interesting debate about what is subject-specific rather than generic learning and teaching issues. We have identified a number of areas that, though not unique to teaching theology and religious studies, are more prominent here than in other subjects. How do we teach with respect and with academic integrity in a context where people may have deep personal commitments to a particular faith community? On the other hand, how do we rebuild interest in a subject to which some students may feel they already have the answers, or with which they have no wish to engage? How do we enable students to come to grips with ancient texts that demand close reading and a breadth of background?

These questions raise issues of assessment. The old joke has it that a teacher of theology will not know how successful she has been until the Last Judgment. That raises the question of how we assess a student’s academic ability rather than faith commitment. What are the particular skills and knowledge base to be assessed, and how can this best be done? Is it not the business of the PRS-LTSN to promulgate authoritative standards on such matters to the community of scholars, but rather to act as broker for the discussions that are already going on.

Part of that role is to make the results of scholarly discussion of these matters available to our clientele. Once we are looking, it became clear that the amount of published writing available on the range of theology and religious studies at the university level is quite small, and specifically British reflection even more so. What material does exist is not always very accessible, nor widely distributed. The PRS-LTSN is concerned to make such materials more available and to provide critical guidelines for its assessment.

The web site now contains a substantial number of reviews of the literature, providing a quick way to locate and evaluate information. We expect the digest of already existing materials to be fully comprehensive by the end of the first term. At the same time, through commissioned articles or as an outcome of conferences and consultations, a number of original materials is being generated and disseminated. We have produced a number of original docu- ments to pump-prime discussion and further research in the subject area. We have more in the pipeline. We are eager to encourage teachers to record and reflect on their practice for the benefit of their colleagues, and are hoping to be able to offer small grants for such work.

One of our central aims is to foster and develop a scholarship of teaching, British academics, in particular, are under pressure to publish material that can be counted towards the national Research Assessment Exercise, which affects departmental funding. This could reinforce a long-standing feeling that teaching and writing on teaching is not “proper” research. Wisely, however, the Research Assessors are happy to encourage such practice. The opportunity to reflect for an academically respectable discussion to develop.

As part of this, we can serve as information brokers. The LTSN does not exist to be a centre of expertise on every aspect of teaching, but it can act as a repository for information, and as a clearinghouse. If you have a question about any aspect of teaching, we will try to put you in touch with other people dealing with the same issues, or point you toward relevant litera- ture. This service is primarily designed for the British environment, but all are welcome to come make use of it.

Where and who we are

The main office of the PRS-LTSN is based at the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, but the centre is a partnership between Leeds and the University of Wales Lampeter. In its own right, the Lampeter Centre is deliberately inclusive, so as to reflect the British diversity. Between them, the two institutions represent complementary aspects of British higher education.

The staff of the PRS-LTSN are all experi- enced teachers and researchers in their respective disciplines. The Director is George Macdonald Ross, whose own speciality is Philosophy. Hugh Pyper, Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the University of Leeds, is directly responsible for Theology and Religious Studies. The Associate Director at Lampeter, Dr Bill Campbell, is an emeritus scholar and a Reader in the Department there. He is a specialist in Pauline Studies, with a long experience of teaching and administration in a range of institutions. His team, based at Leeds, are also academics — coincidentally, all with a background in Buddhist studies. Simon Smith manages the Centre, Nik Jewell is responsible for the IT aspects of the work, and David Moseley is the information officer. A number of colleagues work with the Centre: full details can be found on the web site.

Every department in Britain has been asked to nominate a contact person to act as a channel of information between PRS-LTSN and departmental staff and students. Events to discuss topics of interest or to share good practice are organised by both the Leeds and Lampeter Centres. The institutions and practitioners around the country are also encouraged to run regional events or conferences. In this way, teachers will be able to extend their professional networks and, together with a number of other colleagues work with the Centre: full details can be found on the web site.

An Introduction to the Philosophical and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network (PRS-LTSN)

Departments vary widely in size, specialties, and course structures, but there has been an increasing trend towards the combination of theology and religious studies. Leeds has taught a degree under that title for over thirty years. Partly, this reflects pressure from students but it also reflects developments in the understanding of education in the field. Put positively, it means that students are required to combine both the study of religions as human and social phenomena with some attempt to inhabit imaginatively the worldview, inner life, and intellectual development of at least one religious tradition that has tended to be Christianity.

Most departments attempt to combine lectures with small group teaching, but most are also in a situation where the ratio of students to staff is increasing, making small group teaching courses well beyond the reach of almost all departments. At the same time, the amount of money allocated per student by the funding bodies has not been matched by the increase in student numbers. Innovative self-directed teaching strategies may help. There is a place for the Internet and computer-based support to take these cost-effective and timesaving routes needed to be resisted. There is a great deal that can be learned from discussions about the economics of teaching, other economic factors have inevitably had an effect on recruitment for subjects that do not have a clear vocational relevance.

This, too, has accelerated the need for university teachers to consider the relevance of what they teach, and how to argue the case for its value.

A recent initiative that has sharpened awareness of the diversity of provision is the so-called “Benchmarking” document by a team of subject specialists under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency. It sets out a series of questions on departmental structure and provision of theology and religious studies in British institutions and gives indicative marks for the kind of knowledge that students should acquire during their degrees. The benchmark document is deliberately inclusive, so as to reflect the diversity of provision. It could provide a useful checklist for theological and religious studies educators who maybe designing new teaching courses or looking at the situation in the US. To comment, or for inclusion in discussions etc., e-mail enquiries@prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk.

Teaching Theology and Religious Studies in Britain

The articles in this issue of Spotlight on Teaching describe in more detail aspects of teaching theology and religious studies in Modern Britain. At present, we have links to 47 institutions offering degrees in some aspect of theology and religious studies.

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David Ferguson is Professor of Divinity in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. He reflects on the changing face of theological teaching from one of Britain’s oldest and most prestigious centres of theological education.

The long colonial engagement of Britain with the countries of South Asia, together with the presence of many immigrants from those countries in Britain, raises particular questions regarding teaching the religions of the region in British universities. In the following article, Dr Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, who lectures on the topic at The University of Lancaster, offers a personal perspective on these issues.

Teaching Systematic Theology in Britain Today

David Ferguson, University of Edinburgh

Teaching South Asian Religions in Britain

Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, The University of Lancaster

The present context arises from a shift of the study of Asian religions from Oriental studies into religious studies. When religious studies emerged as a university discipline, Britain was still wrestling with the context of British history and its consequences. When related to spiritual practice, ethics, pastoral care, art, literature, science, and the other world religions, Christian theology continues to excite student attention. This may be perceived as providing part of the opportunity for modern systematic theology to reconnect with spirituality, ethics, and other academic disciplines. The typical syllabus today is more interactive, comparative, and cross-disciplinary in its scope. Within this environment, the Templeton Foundation, for example, has been successful in its pump-priming of courses in theology and science across the country, while several centres also reveal a burgeoning interest in the relationship of theology to the arts.

In his recent work on models of theological education, David Kelsey distinguishes the two dominant paradigms derived from classical Greece and modern Berlin that have informed recent approaches.¹ The former viewed the study of theology in the context of personal formation. It was a type of paedae in which the participant was shaped by the object of study. This model was appropriated by the church in its chariterscal schools. Here, theology was transformative. The study of texts and traditions could not be undertaken except by reference to their contribution to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual welfare of the person. In an effort to defend the academic integrity of theology in the post-Enlightenment period, the model of theology as directed toward professional training replaced that of paedae. It took its place alongside other modern disciplines and was characterised by the same scholarly rigour, objectivity, research excellence, and dissemination.

The study of World Religions: As I argue throughout this essay, the peculiarity of the British connection with South Asia has tremendous influence on the teaching of South Asian religions. The abstract notion of religious studies as an ideally de-centred approach to (semi-constructed) cultural “blocks” does indeed exist in Britain. But perhaps because British intellectual hierarchies are still cluttered with the specificities of painful historical gement, there is less ease with the theoreti cal correspondence of a term to capture a popular generic nature of so-called “world religions.” Although the pragmatic need for an introductory survey is increasingly recognised, it is rare to find a course in which a single lecturer ranges over several religious degrees involving theology are more common than in the past, and many students pursuing a BA degree will take the occasional course in theology. The audience the contemporary teacher of the discipline now faces presents a challenge very different to that of twenty years ago. A rudimentary knowledge of the Bible can no longer be assumed, far less an awareness of some of the key episodes and figures in Christian history. A passionate interest in the filioque controversy, the Pelagian dispute, reformation controversies about the sacraments, and competing views of the work of Christ cannot be guaranteed. Strenuous work in analytic philosophy of religion may also be less appealing for today’s student constituency.

The fading significance of our oldest and most prestigious universities. He reflects on the teaching from one of Britain’s oldest and most prestigious centres of theological education.

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Very occasionally, language-based courses are available at the undergraduate level as well, but not in Theology/Religious Studies departments. The pressure on language-based approaches is obvious. As in the US, only rich and large departments or centres could not be undertaken except by reference to their contribution to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual welfare of the person. In an effort to defend the academic integrity of theology in the post-Enlightenment period, the model of theology as directed toward professional training replaced that of paedae. It took its place alongside other modern disciplines and was characterised by the same scholarly rigour, objectivity, research excellence, and dissemination.

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The Internet has revolutionised communication between students and academics around the world, but this has been a mixed blessing. The sources students find for their work are of very varied quality, and a British lecturer may discover that students are handling in suspiciously well written and knowledgeable essays with American spelling. In this paper, Gary Bunt, LTSN Project Officer at Lampeter and Lecturer in Islamic Studies in Lampeter’s Theology and Religious Studies Department, discusses some of their opportunities and problems, and the ways in which the LTSN and other bodies are trying to help teachers keep on top of this rapidly changing scene.

Questions are often raised as to whether an essay that demonstrates skill using search engines is academically as respectable as an essay of comparable contents using physical documents. The assumption that the more conventional essay is somehow worthier may not be valid. Books are expensive, and many students have limited resources. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds may make greater use of Web resources as means of researching specific topics. University libraries may themselves have limited religious studies holdings, with key texts being available only via restricted access. The Internet, even when it does not provide key texts online, can offer a range of specialist material that are easy to locate and are inexpensive or free to use. Such resources, when appropriately applied, offer new dimensions in the study of religion that can only improve a student’s learning experience.1

Cost is particularly relevant for those students using free Internet access via their academic institutions. The Internet is a means of widening access and academic participation in higher education, especially for students with limited financial resources. A student may be stimulated, through reading religious studies related material online, to study a particular subject in more depth or to search out a printed resource. Such access is particularly important for the growing number of part-time students in access courses, further education, or higher education, where local resources are inadequate to study a religious studies subject in depth. The Internet can also open up religious studies resources for pedagogy with physical documents that act as barriers to learning.2

Training and guidance for students employing computer-mediated materials is essential. Comparative textual resources are particularly important in order to highlight translations, commentaries, and nuances of detail. Simply providing a student with a long list of subject-related URLs without explanation of their relevance is not constructive. It may be useful to integrate Web research into teaching by examining, within a lecture room discussion, the relevance (or lack thereof) of certain sites. This gives training in key learning skills. Institutional support, technical infrastructures, and training in use assist in developing this aspect of pedagogy.

Not all religious studies students necessarily want to employ the Internet as a resource for their studies, and in some cases a “backlash” against the medium has been noted. The majority of entrants coming from high school directly to religious studies undergraduate courses in Britain will have some familiarity with the Internet, however, whilst mature entrants can gain training in the medium if they attend the Access courses offered by various colleges. The widespread availability of the Internet in public libraries, further education institutions, and even Internet cafés indicates a likelihood of Internet awareness among all students. Higher education institutions also offer training in the technical aspects of using the Web.

A balance must be drawn between what is lost and what is gained through reading hypertext. Many Internet users instantly print out any material they need. This may be practical for individual pages, but becomes impractical with substantial and primary texts in religious studies. Some religious studies courses lend themselves more to the medium than do others. The study of contemporary religious movements or world religions, for instance, have a wealth of constantly updated material available online.

There is a danger that students may become overly reliant on hypertext, ignoring other key subject sources. This can have a negative impact when traditional academic skills are completely submerged by technology. Patterns of student work can be influenced by the Internet, given the distractions available online and the illusion that simply surfing and searching for material on a subject is the equivalent of writing an essay. Poor management of research time and Internet fatigue can lead to missed essay deadlines. External and internal factors, including computer breakdowns, viruses, and network problems also influence the patterns of work and the reliability of the Internet as a research tool.

Online documents are not read in the same way as conventional printed sources. A text may be searched for key terms, and often partial忽视上看 ignored. A page offers an array of unconventional ways to other sections of the same site or to external sites. These traits in commentaries and motivations for putting a site online need to be considered when evaluating resources.3

Consideration needs to be given to the quality of external resources available for use as online. Lecturers may find that their role increasingly includes being a guide to academically credible religious studies Internet resources. Through its involvement with the Virtual Training Suite project funded by Britain’s Resource Development network, PRS-LLN has developed resources for theological and religious studies lecturers and students designed to guide them through the Internet maze whilst learning about approaches toward hypertext sources. This is not simply another compendium of links, but provides training for lecturers and students in the opportunities and pitfalls of using the Internet. It includes interactive material, with quizzes and self-help sections. There is potential to help build courses — especially at access and introductory levels — around analysis, discussion, and evaluation of religiously related Web materials. This can develop transferable skills of student critical thinking, which can in turn be applied in other academic areas.4

Drawing on shared experience, lecturers can present lists of “approved” online resources. This is a particularly important issue in the fields of theology and religious studies, where numerous polemical and — especially at access and introductory levels — around analysis, discussion, and evaluation of religiously related Web materials. This can develop transferable skills of student critical thinking, which can in turn be applied in other academic areas.4

Several companies, located primarily in the United States, offer essays in religious studies. The influence of American scholarship on British students using such resources is an interesting phenomenon, especially when little effort is made to transform American English into British English! The essays are written by post-graduate students and are “approved” according to the quality of content. This ensures that a C-average student does not provide information that would fail a C-grade essays drawn from the Internet. The availability of subject specific commentaries and other free materials — which can be cut, pasted, and adjusted by students into “original” work — also needs to be considereed.

One popular company, Cyber Essays, has a “Religion and Cults” section that is subdivided into thirteen categories, ranging from “Religion of the World” to “Superstition and Myths.” Cyber Essays offers 78 pages, each with descriptions of at least eight essays. The latter category contains six pages of titles. Essays can be paid for by credit card (Visa, Mastercard). Cyber Essays offers a customized essay service. I cannot vouch for the quality of the essays contained in the service, but the range of titles certainly comprehensive. The issue of presenting polemical views against a particular faith perspective have, in their view, negatively influenced the academic environment.

The Internet seems to have great advantages not only in terms of diversity, but also in terms of currency. The Internet offers regularly updated resources, including information that previously may have taken months or years to obtain from an academic arena. On the other hand, the danger of information overload must be considered for students as well as lecturers. Sites can change regularly, requiring frequent re-visit to monitor any key subject sites closely. URLs can also vanish without a trace! In extreme circumstances, hacking can alter a site’s appearance and content. I had the unfortunate experience of recommending a URL on an online course listing for Islamic Studies. John Sato, chairman of the Online Information Systems Committee (JISC) is responsible for oversight of Web related resources in British education. He notes:

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Several companies, located primarily in the United States, offer essays in religious studies. The influence of American scholarship on British students using such resources is an interesting phenomenon, especially when little effort is made to transform American English into British English! The essays are written by post-graduate students and are “approved” according to the quality of content. This ensures that a C-average student does not provide information that would fail a C-grade essays drawn from the Internet. The availability of subject specific commentaries and other free materials — which can be cut, pasted, and adjusted by students into “original” work — also needs to be considereed.

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The mutual influence of Religious Education in schools and Religious Studies/Theology in Universities in the English context

Denise Cash, Bath Spa University College

Denise Cash, Head of the Department of Study of Religions and Senior Lecturer in Study of Religions and Religious Education at Bath Spa University College, Bath, (http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/or) in the Southwest of England. In the following article, she outlines the distinctive place of religious education in schools in Great Britain and reflects on how this impacts university teaching. She can be contacted at d.cush@bathspa.ac.uk.

A MAJOR DIFFERENCE between teaching religious studies and religious education is that in the UK and in the US is that in the UK, students will have had the opportunity to study religious education at Key Stage 3. In the UK, schools that are wholly state-funded (which the vast majority of pupils attend) provide non-confessional religious education. Almost 90% of school children are exposed, from the ages of five to sixteen or eighteen, to a religious education that is open and multifaith. National law stipulates that syllabi “should reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.” In England, religious education syllabi for schools are organised at a county level by local government, but the majority follow national guidelines. These state that there are to be two sides to religious education in schools: “learning about” and “learning from” the religious traditions. The latter means that pupils have to have the opportunity to explore their own ideas about the kind of ultimate questions with which religions deal.

Religious education in schools in the UK is an academic rather than religious pursuit, with the educational aim of learning about and understanding religions rather than nurturing faith in a particular religion. It is thus a good preparation for the academic study of religion in universities. This is still quite an unusual approach for national education policies to take. The majority of nations in the world either omit religious education altogether from their national education policies to take. The latter is a relatively new discipline that is still in places struggling against the hegemony of traditional Christian theology. It is religious studies, and not religious education, that is religious literacy, that is more aligned with the aims of the religious education of the local county syllabi. Theology or Biblical studies is appropriate preparation for some of the public examinations, or for religious education as it is taught in some Church aided schools and some independent schools. I have also argued that theology, especially if it is widened to include more than Christian theology, (following Ninian Smart’s suggestion of “theologies in the plural”), reflects the side of religious education in schools where students explore their own beliefs and values, and are provided with opportunities for personal spiritual development. Neither of these tend to be explicitly addressed in purely religious studies degrees.

In the same article, I argue that the three disciplines of religious studies, theology, and religious education are not separate – that the students can learn from each other. University religious studies has established a thoroughly academic (scientific?) approach to the study of religions and has passed its phenomenological and ethnographic approaches on to school religious education. The specialist study possible in university research can provide schools with up to date subject knowledge and the latest theories. One recent university debate of great use to schools is for Denise Cash, Fall 2001 AAR JRN • 5

The religions included in school syllabi are the six most strongly represented in the population: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and Sikhism. There have been recent debates about the inclusion of Paganism (neo-Paganism) as a rapidly growing spiritual identity, as well as Humanism. (People with no religious belief make up at least 30% of the population, although not many of these are Humanists in the specific sense.) There is scope within many local syllabi for including locally important minorities such as Jains or Bahais. Even though the study of Humanism is rarely specified, the fact that teachers take account of and explore students’ own beliefs means that non-religious life stances are, in practice, included.

Phenomenological approach

Since the publication of the influential ‘Working Paper 30’ thirty years ago, the approach to religious education in state-funded schools has been heavily influenced by a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. A crucial figure in the popularity of this approach in both universities and schools is the late Ninian Smart. Smart saw involvement with what happens in schools as very much the concern of a university professor. As applied to religious education in schools, the phenomenological approach does not imply the philosophy of Husserl or the theory of Eliade, but simply an attempt to look at the full range of religions in as open a way as possible, putting aside prejudice and preconception and attempting to empathise with and understand the believer’s point of view. Although, in the intervening decades this approach has been both criticised and supplemented, it still lies at the heart of the basic approach to religions in state schools. Teachers, who were delighted that they were no longer expected to promote religious belief amongst their relevant pupils and that they could include a range of worldviews in their curricula, warmly welcomed it at its inception.

The main ways in which the phenomenological approach to religious education in schools has been supplemented over the last thirty years can be characterised as existential, experiential, ethnographic and philosophical.

Existential approach

“Existential” refers to the contention that, for religious education to be effective, it must have a connection with the students’ own interests, concerns, and developmental needs. This approach is currently reflected in the Children and Worldviews Project of Errieker et al. It is concerned with the work of Michael Caterm. It is reflected in the attainment targets of many religious education syllabi. For example, the syllabus current in my local area, Awareness, Mystery and Value (which requires pupils to learn from religion and human experience, as well as learn about Religion. This means that by the end of their school education, students should have the ability to:

1. reflect on aspects of human nature, identity, personality, and experience, especially in the light of one’s own beliefs and experience;
2. identify and respond to questions about the nature and purpose of life on earth;
3. give an informed and considered response to religious and moral issues;
4. identify, name, describe, and give accounts (of religions) in order to build a coherent picture of religious beliefs about the spiritual dimension of life;
5. explain similarities and differences between and within religious practices and lifestyles;
6. explain the meaning of religious language, story, and symbolism.”

This is much more than simply knowing “the facts” about a range of traditional religions — a common misinterpretation by teachers of the aims of the phenomenological approach!

Experiential approach

“Experiential” refers to two things. First, students gain first hand experience of religious communities by going out and visiting them on their own ground. (Visits to places of worship or religious events, such as including space for reflective exercises like meditation and guided fantasy. David Hay and John Hammond are among those who have developed this methodology for schools.)

Ethnographic Approach

“Ethnographic” refers to the work of Robert Jackson and others who stress the need for students to engage with religion as it is lived in all its diversity and fuzziness. Thus, many recent books for schools are based on introducing the student in the class to real children and young people in religious traditions.

Philosophical Approach

“Philosophical” refers to the opportunity for students to discuss the challenging questions that they face in their daily lives, and the possibility for them to explore their own views and to criticise those of the religious heritage presented to them. In this connection, Andrew Wright’s “talks of religious literacy,” and religious education that is challenging and disturbing rather than an unchanging description of other peoples’ beliefs.”

If carried out effectively, religious education on the above model is an excellent preparation for a degree in Christian theology. At the end of a student’s school career in England, there are national examination options at 16 (GCSE, General Certificate of Secondary Education) and 18 (Advanced Level), organised by examination boards rather than the local government. These include papers in Christian theology and Biblical studies, as well as major world religions and philosophy of religion. These will only be offered by a minority of pupils (GCSE by about 17%; A level by about 5%). A recent success story is the introduction of a short course, equivalent to half a GCSE, which gives credit for a subject that has to be studied anyway, exam or no exam, and which tends to focus on religions, phenomenological and moral issues relevant to students’ interests. These papers were taken by 22% of school pupils last year, making a total of 39% of 16 year olds taking a public examination in religious education.

Because of the inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum, the vast majority of students entering English universities have studied religion in schools. Thus, university teachers have a responsibility to acknowledge and build upon students’ previous learning and examining for the first time the facts about major world religions could be a religiously and ethically neglected in terms of time given, resources provided, specialist teachers, (i.e., those with thorough knowledge of religions), and standards reached. Only a minority of pupils choose to take public examinations for religious education. Although there is great potential in school religious education, in practice, university tutors may find that their students do not arrive with any knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a reading of school syllabi might lead them to expect.

Turning from schools to university level education, there is in the UK some tension between theology and religious studies. The latter is a relatively new discipline that is still in places struggling against the hegemony of traditional Christian theology. It is religious studies, and not religious education, that is religious literacy, that is more aligned with the aims of the religious education of the local county syllabi. Theology or Biblical studies is appropriate preparation for some of the public examinations, or for religious education as it is taught in some Church aided schools and some independent schools. I have also argued that theology, especially if it is widened to include more than Christian theology, (following Ninian Smart’s suggestion of “theologies in the plural”), reflects the side of religious education in schools where students explore their own beliefs and values, and are provided with opportunities for personal spiritual development. Neither of these tend to be explicitly addressed in purely religious studies degrees.

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The impact of http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark social status, and the significance of religion unexamined, selective, and ahistorial ideas Western norm in the interpretation of if they never manage to identify and gently drawing out these assumptions. The skill of concerned lecturers consists in way. Less skilful lecturers can easily

The multiculturality of British society of if British religious studies student teaching lends immediacy to this approach, for there is a continued sense of engagement with the countries from which Britain has gained its multiculturality nature.

Multiculturalism: The impact of multiculturalityattitudes on the teaching of South Asian religions is significant. Compared to the general and conceptual debits in the US, multiculturality in Britain is relatively more demographically focused and, in consequence, socially clarified. Although it sometimes brings in issues of European identity, multiculturality normally means recognising immigrant populations from major portions of former colonies, and the immigration from South Asia. This recognition came to be called (in the late 1970s, of course — shades of another sort of empire) "the empire strikes back". In the 1980s and 1990s, South Asians (called "Asians" in Britain) saw their shifting position in British society gradually impact on the teaching of their religions in Britain. Whether socio-economically impoverished or otherwise, that South Asians have become a stable part of society. This has contributed to burgeoning debates about "Britishness" and identity. In religion studies, it is multiculturality that is the use of micro-studies of religious communities in South Asia as part of more general courses/modules.

Engaged radicalism: As reflexive awareness of the academic researcher's hegemonic participation in the modern academy alongside medicine, law, and education. As a rough generalisation, one might put in a conceptual context that promotes an unexamined ideology that takes as normal and normative certain beliefs, values, and interpretive paradigms derived from contemporary Christianity into the interpretation of other traditions.

Subaltern studies: Especially evident in religious studies teaching informed by political and literary critical studies of the post-colonial kind, this represents an astringent and radicalised critique of Western prejudices of sub-imperial conservatism and the genteel ambiguities of post-1960s liberalism. Although famous as a research area, subaltern approaches are also making their way into teaching — even into the teaching of theology. They are a good up-shot to understand a non-Western cultural situation through the agency of the actors in it, rather than in terms of the imperial concerns of the West. This also challenges the use of micro-studies of religious communities in South Asia as part of more general courses/modules.

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Teaching Biblical Studies to Non-Traditional Students in British Higher Education

Bill Campbell, Lampeter University

The face of theological and religious studies education in Britain is changing rapidly. In this final article, Bill Campbell, Associate Director of the PRS-LTSN in Lampeter and editor of The Journal of Beliefs and Values, gives a personal account of one experienced teacher’s adaptation to the new circumstances he has faced.

Teaching Biblical Studies to Non-Traditional Students

In the higher education landscape in Britain has changed enormously in the last few decades. Previously, the average undergraduate class had a large majority of students who had very recently or immediately graduated from school — leaving examinations to enter university or college. Gradually, access to higher education has been widened to include entrants with non-traditional qualifications, enabling mature and retrenched people to enter the system more easily. In recent years, colleges and universities with courses leading to teaching qualifications for state (i.e. public) schools have attracted many more women. The outcome for higher education is a huge increase in part-time and distance-learning students. This represents a great opportunity for religious studies, and these are issues of particular importance to the PRS-LTSN.

Another major change in the student population has been the increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, especially in inner-city areas. It is no longer wise for a lecturer to assume knowledge of the background or family circumstances of a student group. This enormous diversity includes Muslims and Hindus from various parts of the world and different strands of faith as well as diverse Christian, post-Christian, and humanist or atheistic students.

I have found that the only expectation I can have of my students is that they are committed to the study of religion, whether or not they might ever wish to practice it. It is an interesting experience to teach Christianity to people of several different backgrounds and to consider these as issues of particular importance to the PRS-LTSN.

The Presuppositions and Starting Point

In teaching a “normal” undergraduate class in Britain, one used to be able to assume a certain basic knowledge and skill level. Despite the variety of examinations boards mediating the transition from school to university. But with non-traditional mature students, where does one start? Should one proceed from the general to the particular, or vice versa?

My decision is normally to start with the particular, providing minimal background information of the first century Hellenistic world. I begin with the opening theme of biblical texts. Sociologically, Paul may be a first-century man, but it is his distinctiveness that makes him religiously. It is on this that I choose to concentrate. Of course, one must study Paul in his historical, geographical and cultural context; otherwise we would be looking at religion in a vacuum, as if spirituality were entirely independent of earthly realities such as religious community, traditions, and political setting. Even in a short course or module, however, it would amount to failure in teaching religion or theology if we succeeded only in giving students a good grounding in Hellenism alongside a poor understanding of Paul’s letters. The main part of teaching biblical studies in the UK has broadened considerably in the last 30 years, sociologically, historically, and in interrelation. While insights from areas such as these may be useful to our discipline, as teachers of biblical studies we are not teaching sociology or even ancient history.

The Presuppositions of the Students

Good pedagogy begins where the students are. This means taking account of their presuppositions. Biblical studies, even in a (so-called) post-Christian British context, encounters inherited attitudes towards the Bible. In the case of some mature students with a life-long commitment to the church, the Bible is not just another text-book but a resource for spiritual nourishment, a guide to ultimate values, and perhaps even the very words of God. Other mature students may not share this perspective because they regard it as not being an authority. Students who are feminist may take this to mean that Paul with patriarchal oppression, and Jewish students may regard him as an apostate from Judaism.

My response to these presuppositions is to make the following assumptions: First, a historical approach to biblical texts. I start by asking the students to read a particular letter, noting and perhaps even underlining the text those verses that refer to biblical historical places, people, and actions. This exercise attempts to subvert a purely spiritual or theological approach to the text, encouraging critical analysis rather than merely devotion or cynicism arising from inherited assumptions.

“Starting where the students are,” in the case of mature students, means taking into account their previous experience. Even students who may have had recent experience in relation to any world religion can be a useful communication bridge, this must be related specifically to the biblical text. Of course, one finds the class taken up with long and irrelevant accounts of personal narrative. Personal experience of religion is valuable and has its legitimate role, but it must not prevent a real encounter with the text being studied. The intention in stressing the historical approach is also to point the students toward a literary approach, seeing the letters as narrative, and studying the interaction of the characters within the narrative. More mature students have an advantage here: their varied experiences give them a broader basis for comparison, and an understanding of human relations and emotions.

Course Construction

In the presentation of any course, a basic decision is whether quantity or quality of teaching content is the more important. Too much detail early in the course is counter-productive, especially where the module content is completely new; some students unfortunately think that if you remember every detail and then “can’t see the wood for the trees.” The intention in this module was to give students sufficient introduction to the main issues involved in the study of Paul’s letters as Biblical texts. I decided to limit myself to one letter per week, thus dividing the module into 20 constituent parts. This meant that some topics could not be included. I had to think very carefully about my criteria for inclusion or exclusion.

The basis for my selection was that the texts not be studied merely because they are central and significant for Christianity, but also because they have the potential to inform your methodology of studying other texts that we did not have time to consider in this module. This essentially was an exercise in picking your way through a large body of work. Students, despite its brevity, can prove to be an excellent introduction to Paul’s letters, demonstrating many of the qualities of the longer letters.

In order to assist students towards independent study, I provided summaries of the lectures, and a listing of the relevant Biblical texts. Wherever possible, I limited these summaries to 500-750 words, with space for the maximum of 1000 words. The purpose was to provide students with a summary of the main issues substantive enough to introduce them to the topics, but not so detailed as to be too complex. For greater depth of understanding, a very precise but limited reading list was included at the end of each lecture summary.

Surprisingly, despite innumerable scholarly works on Paul, I found none that really suited the type of student and form of teaching I wanted to adopt. Some students came from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and many also do not have easy access to good library facilities. I came to realize that one easy way to provide appropriate materials was for me to summarize the most useful passages or center of books that I knew the students could easily understand and use. I also provided access to articles of my own — in electronic form as well as in hard copy — for which I had distribution permission.

Sequence of Lecture Topics

In view of the fact that students and I met only once a week, the sequence of lecture topics was crucial. If I introduced a particular topic early in the course, I would have had to give a certain amount of explanation. This would have been unnecessary had lectures on other related topics already been given. The sequence of presentations was such that it had a cumulative and significant. To some extent, it determined the models of Paul that one wishes to present (community, priest, canon, charismatic, teacher, theologian, etc.). Early in the course, therefore, I gave an overview of what we can with reasonable certainty know of Paul’s life and activity in the general context of contemporary events in the first century Hellenistic world. This had the effect of stressing historicity, of depicting Paul as a founder of communities, and thus of emphasizing what he did and not what he said. It also had the effect of contextualizing Paul’s teaching in real life social situations rather than in an historical vacuum.

Gaining an Understanding of the Content

Once provided with some introductory skills and a minimal historical framework, students were ready to study the text in accordance with the perspectives already acquired. They now needed to investigate in more detail why a particular text was first created, and for what purpose. In the Paul’s case, it is possible to discover from his letters from where they were sent, the reasons for sending, and even, to some extent, the nature of the audience for whom they were intended. Recommended reading at this point included standard Biblical commentaries with a good historical introduction, so that students were made aware of the interaction between the occasion of the document and its content.

Two major issues arise here. First, a general presupposition amongst students of Christian cultural background is that they tend to regard Paul’s statements as theological rather than historical. Second, partly resulting from the first issue, his statements are seen to be of universal application rather than relating to particular communities and contexts. It is important to stress this particular, for people of other faiths are participating in order to make clear that, when Paul offers criticism, he is addressing his own converts and not adherents of other religions.

By considering Paul’s statements in context, students can discover that what he says, to a particular community at a particular moment in its history. This can be
deconstruction of the whole notion of world religions. There is a recognition that the term "religion" is itself a mere construct, a useful tool, but not to be taken as reality. At the school level, this helps guard against the tendency to see religions as monolithic, unchanging, and clearly distinguished from one another. University theology can prevent school religious education from being a tourist guide through other people's beliefs and customs. Instead, it can provide in-depth knowledge of its university equivalent at the level of theology? Religious education is often ahead of its university equivalent at the level of theology? Religious education? (London: QCA, 2000).


4. For students of Hinduism, this opens up this significant possibility of its university equivalent at the level of theology? Religious education? (London: QCA, 2000).


6. University: Gabriel Haddad, "How to be a tourist guide through other people's beliefs and customs. Instead, it can provide in-depth knowledge of its university equivalent at the level of theology? Religious education is often ahead of its university equivalent at the level of theology? Religious education? (London: QCA, 2000)."