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Theology and Religious Studies: new inspirations?

Silvianna Aspray, Benjamin Kirby, Judith Lieu and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad discuss past and future directions

The origins of the university system in the West are inseparable from the study of Christian theology – usually designed for the more advanced education of clergy and monks. In that context, the question of God was a necessary and invariable part of the question of how we understand the world and ourselves, even of what it means ‘to know’. In the contemporary world, especially in the West, ‘the question of God’ is no longer self-evident, and indeed is regarded by many as alien to our task of the pursuit of knowledge. Yet what is now called ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ (TRS, on which more below) continues to excite, way beyond the confines of the earliest clientele. Two aspects of this were explored in a pair of recent conversations, each between a senior academic and a researcher near the beginning of their academic career.

What religious texts do, and not just what they say

The close reading of texts, especially texts that deal in some way with God, has been

a constant thread throughout the history of Christianity (and not just of Christianity), and is one of the hallmarks of TRS. Yet increasingly we are not excavating these texts for their ideas or the story they tell, but locating them in much larger stories. Dr Silvianna Aspray explained, ‘One of the things that excites me about my research, and in general about the way that philosophical theology is explored in this country, is how I am encouraged to combine a detailed case study of a historical thinker and historical sources, with thinking about what implications they have for bigger narratives, such as about what makes modernity “modern”.’

With reference to her own work on Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), she said: ‘The way in which we perceive reality in our time – for example, that the world can be imagined regardless of whether it has some kind of origin, or goal beyond itself – is not the only possible way. This becomes clear to me time and again when I read someone like Cusa, who could not think of reality apart from its relationship to God.’ It is not just a matter of how

such ideas have evolved and changed, but also of the fundamental and far reaching-implications for the understanding of ourselves and of reality that we take for granted.

This close reading of historical sources also challenges us with very different models of what is entailed in ‘thinking’, and therefore with very different understandings of how texts should be read, than those we take for granted. For Silvi-
anne, ‘in our time, the normal stance is to think of ourselves as readers who are somehow neutral. When we read something, we expect that some kind of propositional knowledge is being conveyed to us. We stand somewhat outside the text, as neutral observers and receivers.’ This stands in contrast to some of the texts that we read from pre-modernity. ‘They want something to happen to the reader in a much more embodied way, in a way that actually guides the readers’ thinking and imagination. For example, most pre-modern texts about prayer do not try to be neutral and detached. Rather, in talking about the importance of prayer, the texts may want to lead you into a prayer. They may try to shape your imagination, or the

habits of your mind.’

This should make us rethink other classic pre-modern texts – proofs of God, for instance. ‘There is a long modern tradition of reading them as if their authors were saying, “With these clever tricks of thought and word, I can prove the existence of God.” But perhaps someone like Anselm of Canterbury never meant his ontological argument to be read that way. Rather, as many now think, he wanted to get his readers to ponder about the problem of perceiving God. The neutral, detached, sceptical standpoint is a very modern thing.’

This attention to what texts *do*, to their ‘performativity’, is something that runs across TRS. Professor Judith Lieu’s own work on the New Testament and the early church has followed a similar trajectory. ‘When I started my lifelong close study of John’s Gospel, people thought about reading texts as picking out the ideas. So, I might ask, “What does this text say about God? Or, what does this text say about who Jesus is in relationship to God? What does this text say about salvation?” Now, we pay much more attention to the way that texts shape individuals and shape

communities. Texts *do* things. One way that we look at that is by recognising that a text like John’s gospel is a narrative; and we can explore how that narrative works to invite the readers inside, to identify with characters, to be shaped by the plot, to take sides or claim insight when the author uses irony or double entendre.’

This is true more widely. We have very limited access to the historical realities behind the texts, but no doubt they were much messier; the texts we are reading may be distorting the reality and projecting what they hope to generate. ‘We used to look at (other) early Christian texts as the source of ideas or as providing information about what people thought at that stage, how the Church was structured, or something like that. Now we read texts much more in terms of “how were they trying to shape something that was new?” When people became Christians, they did not become something that already existed. Christianity was *in the making*. And therefore the early texts were seeking to give shape to individuals and to communities. To use the modern jargon, they were “shaping identities”.’

Judith continued, ‘Recently my work has been on the emergence of the idea of heresy. There was not a preformed true belief from the start. Rather, out of what is probably a swirling experimentation with ideas, a process develops through texts by which notions of true belief and wrong belief emerge, boundaries are drawn or experimented with, outsiders are castigated. It is a process *through texts*. In practice, who believed what and in what numbers is largely lost to us.’

Of course, this emphasis on the performativity of texts is not peculiar to TRS: it shows how the discipline is always in conversation with other disciplines – literary studies or classical studies to begin with. Yet this conversation explored what it is that is distinctive about the texts we read or the context in which we read them. ‘Perhaps,’ Silvi-
anne suggested, ‘this kind of focus is particularly pronounced in TRS because the challenge of theology has always been to talk or think about something that is beyond the reach of language in some way, “the transcendent”. There is always this understanding that, whatever words we use to talk about the divine, they are just scaffolding, and while we climb the scaffolding, it also falls down. Language that starts from the things that can be seen and touched has somehow to be stretched when applied to



Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), from a painting by the Master of the Life of the Virgin.



With the nearby mosque at capacity, Muslim men in the Kariakoo district of Dar es Salaam perform Friday prayer (swala ya Ijuma) in the streets. Photo: George Gasto / Rehoboth Pictures.

God. Theological writers in the past have been very aware of that, and have been trying to get around it by ways of speaking that are not just providing the right bits of information, but are more performative, and are trying to shape imaginations and habits.'

Silvianne agreed that, in terms of method, she could do her work in a history of philosophy faculty, but a faculty or department of TRS does offer something distinctive: 'All my colleagues working in the Divinity Faculty, as diverse as their methods are, are united by an interest in God, and in what thinking about God does to language, to communities, to knowledge, to texts.'

Judith's experience, which includes having worked in a department of ancient history, is much the same. 'What is distinctive about working in a department of theology and religious studies is that it is acceptable to use all one's critical analysis for texts that talk about God, and actually to see God as part of the players, actors, or topics of these texts, without thinking that to do so treads on dangerous ground.' This is highly relevant in a contemporary context. 'Religious texts shape the way

people live and behave in very profound ways, with consequences that effect the lives of those who have little direct interest in religion. It is important to be able to analyse what is going on in texts, without suggesting that this means undermining the authority of those texts. Obviously, there are always those who do feel threatened when you analyse texts that talk about God, particularly if they are part of the sacred scriptures. However, the ability to analyse texts that talk about God without colleagues thinking that this is doing something weird, or something that isn't open to proper analysis, is something that we can do in a department of Theology and Religious Studies.'

Embodying religious identities in social contexts

Dr Benjamin Kirby's research explores how 'religion might be integral to some of the processes that are unfolding in urban African settings.' He focuses on the way that Muslim and Christian identities operate as part of everyday street life in East African cities. Although worlds away from Silvianne's concerns, he also talks about embodiment and performativity, but this

time of religion by human actors, and his work similarly promises to destabilise long-established Western understandings of the divine and the world.

In this he signals how 'Religious Studies' has been transformed over the 50-odd years of its existence. As Professor Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad observed, 'When the study of religion became a kind of conversation partner with the existing discipline of theology, there was an idea that we ought to study religions that are not Judeo-Christian in the same way as we study it,' because it was assumed that to do so was 'objective' or 'neutral', as if 'the Western gaze somehow was outside the picture.'

In the context of the mid-20th century, awareness of the social conditions and challenges that societies elsewhere in the world were facing, and that immigrants from there were facing in the West, often provoked a 'collapsing of religion and society into one trope of backwardness.' Doing so flattened the differences between religious traditions past and present and how they might be critically analysed, and the contemporary societies in which these occurred. It ignored 'the way in which, in practice, ancient texts and ancient practices have been pluralised and have been integrated, and have perhaps been forgotten' – for example, in modern India, one of Ram-Prasad's areas of interest. In Religious Studies that means overcoming the separation between 'textual specialists' and those 'who have been out in the battlefield', and developing a more integrated exploration of how what is observed is 'informed by the unseen history of religion that plays such a living role in what people do today', something that will include their dynamic re-negotiation of ancient texts.

When Ben undertakes his ethnographic work in Tanzania, he is adopting a very different lens and set of questions from that earlier model. He is asking how does religious identity work; how does it 'facilitate interactions'? 'Muslim fashion, particularly among men in informal market districts, acquires an almost infrastructural quality, in that it allows people to create platforms that enable them to engage with strangers. A performed Muslim identity can protect informal workers from the negative attentions of the police.' Spaces, such as mosque complexes, and how they fit into urban architecture, are part of this. This can work differently for Christians and Muslims in the same

setting.

More tentatively Ben suggested that similar observations might be made in a UK setting, for example between Muslim and Christian Nigerians, and the possibilities that religious spaces or patterns of observances offer them and how they are played out in daily lives. 'People are very proficient at performing different forms of religious identity in the everyday settings of their social worlds.' He sees among his African-born friends in the UK that 'the everyday enactment of a Muslim identity carries a very different kind of potency from that of a Christian identity.'

Once again, these specific case studies open the door to reflection on bigger narratives. Ram-Prasad noted how the rise of criticism of 'multiculturalism' and of the policies to address it in the UK has shown little awareness of other periods in history and places – such as India, which 'as a political entity has always been fundamentally polycentric and pluralised, and has always had to have peoples of different religions and languages and ethnicities circulating around.' A more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and identities, and daily performance and living together, will be crucial 'if the Britain of the 21st century is to be able to reconceive itself'.

Recent research in Religious Studies takes this on board, as it has moved from being 'a particular way of looking at the world you go to', to recognising that 'understanding what is going on around the world is necessary for us rather than a gift to them.' Although the university systems and institutions in these other parts of the world may not always have the infrastructure and robustness of our own, their intellectual sophistication is not in doubt, and they are developing models from which we can learn.

Ben recognised this within his own intellectual experience, particularly in debates about what constitutes 'religion'. 'The enduring potency of particularly Western European Protestant notions of what religion constitutes shapes our own assumptions about what should constitute other groups' religious identities. This country has a very distinctive expectation of what religious others should look like, and how we should treat those who fail to live up to that standard, which simply does not map onto other settings where I have done research. In response, religious others in settings like the UK have to perform their identities in concert

with these and adapt to them.'

Ram-Prasad offered a related example. When the Ugandan Asians first came to this country, no distinction was made between Muslims and Hindus; they were Gujarati Indians. In time, 'global changes to the salience of Islam as an identity, not about culture but something that wove together people from different backgrounds, have had an effect on Gujarati Muslims.' And different forces have impacted on Gujarati Hindus. This has led to divergences which extend to the jobs people go into, their holiday destinations, their language about the country in which they now live.

These lines of development in the study of religion again open up debate about where such research is undertaken. Ben's own career illustrates this. Having started with a conventional text-based course at Oxford, he later undertook a masters' degree in Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds; but as his interests developed, he found few obvious conversation partners, except among a few anthropologists of religion. Research in other fields, and particularly that of urban studies, seemed more vital and imaginatively engaging. Yet within African Studies he also encountered a (revealing) concern that studying religion in an African context is necessarily going to be a patronising exercise.

What emerged from their conversation was that those who study religions may have very different areas of focus, completely different regional and temporal interests, and different religious traditions, but overlaps emerge in the shared challenges that come from trying to account for the ways in which 'the idea of the religious has been figured in different settings, and particularly the influence of Western ways of framing religion and the contemporary salience of religious identities.' As Ben said, when specialists in religious studies engage with other disciplines or subject areas, 'scholarly reflection is often directed at troubling or disturbing either the absence of religion in accounts of certain phenomena, or the way it is positioned in relation to other phenomena.'

Reflections

Both these conversations show how scholarship on religion is, and will increasingly be, multi-methodological. That does not mean that those involved in it must become 'Jills of all trades and mistresses

of none', although most do find themselves learning new methods throughout their career. Highly developed expertise is as important as ever – if not more so – whether in ancient and modern languages, philosophical reasoning, social scientific methods, fieldwork skills, historical analysis, and so on. As elsewhere in the humanities, multi-disciplinary collaboration may more and more become the norm – 'simply as a consequence of the need to understand complex issues that have become incapable of being understood by any one human being,' said Ram-Prasad. 'Decentring where we are coming from and not privileging any one sort of experience is one of the most exciting dimensions of growth.'

In April 2019, the British Academy has published a report of Theology and Religious Studies provision in UK Higher Education. That report demonstrates changes in provision and in its pattern, and necessarily concentrates on statistical analysis of contexts which are identifiably centres of the discipline. It reveals how the study of religion is becoming more dispersed, diverse and international, and with fewer students in the traditional TRS departments at public universities. This not only reflects the changing relationship between society and the question of God explored here, but also the changing nature of our universities in a time of mass higher education.

Although this report and the conversations recorded in this article were conceived as independent exercises, reading them together highlights the challenges and the excitement of the field, and, it is to be hoped, will provoke further conversations in which the British Academy will be keen to participate.

The two conversations were convened and edited by Judith Lieu.

Further reading

The British Academy's report on Theology and Religious Studies provision in UK Higher Education, published in April 2019, can be found via thebritishacademy.ac.uk/theology-religious-studies-UK