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The Study of Religion in the UK in its Institutional Context

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How has the study of religion in the UK been shaped by its institutional contexts? Consideration is given to the Christian and secular foundations of universities and higher education colleges, the relationship of theology and religious studies, and the impact of institutional structures and drivers associated with teaching and research. The formation of 'TRS' as an instrumental and contested subject area is discussed, as is the changing curriculum. Research on religion is examined in relation to new institutional pressures and opportunities: the assessment of university research and the public funding of research. The importance of the impact agenda and capacity building are illustrated.

The nineteenth century roots of religious studies (Religionswissenschaft) in Britain lie in the work of scholars such as Max Muller, E.B. Tylor, J.E. Carpenter and T.W. Rhys Davids. Britain hosted the third IAHR Congress in 1908 in Oxford, but the British Association for the History of Religions (later to become the British Association for the Study of Religions) was not founded until 1954, with E.O. James and Geoffrey Parrinder as two of its founder members. Although a Manchester Chair of Comparative Religion was established in 1904, and a Department of Theology *and* Religious Studies was opened at the University of Leeds in the 1930s, it was not until 1967 that the first autonomous non-theological Department of Religious Studies was opened, at Lancaster University, with Ninian Smart as its first Chair.

The academic study of religion in the UK is formally divided into theology (largely Christian in orientation, but increasingly including Islamic and Jewish theology), biblical studies, and religious studies (Religionswissenschaft). Religious studies is a multi-disciplinary field which in the UK has favoured sociological, anthropological, historical, philosophical, geographical and material approaches to religions. Psychology of religion and the cognitive study of religion remain under-represented. All the major religions and many minority and new religions are now researched and taught, and non-religion in all its various guises is increasingly covered in university syllabuses. Since the

1990s, gender, discourse, culture and practice have been important lenses through which to critically examine religion and its study.

Although religious studies is the major non-theological disciplinary field covering the study of religion, 'religion' as subject matter or as an issue is taught in a range of degree programmes and addressed by scholars from a variety of other disciplines, including history, politics and international relations, philosophy, sociology, law studies and educational studies.

University departments, disciplinary relations, and the concept of 'TRS'

UK universities founded prior to the nineteenth century have Christian origins, including Oxford and Cambridge in England, and St Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen in Scotland, most of which were founded by Papal Bull; St David's College Lampeter, in Wales, founded in 1822, was the first Anglican college to provide a general education. The University of Durham was founded in 1831. It was not until the 1850s and 1860s that non-Anglicans were admitted to degrees at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.

Most other universities in the UK have secular foundations, apart from those Church colleges (for example, Chester, Chichester and Leeds Trinity) which acquired university status during the period of university expansion in the 1990s (the majority of which were Anglican, with a minority Catholic).

How have these foundations affected the organisation and teaching of theology and religious studies at UK universities? Until the twenty-first century, most of the faculties, departments and programmes associated with the older universities were labelled 'Divinity'. They focused on Christian theology, and only gradually began to incorporate teaching and research on other religions, often by drawing in other theological traditions (e.g. Islamic theology). A number of the historical Chairs at these universities were supported by Church patronage.

Drawing on this historical model, many of the universities founded in the twentieth century, despite their secular foundations and lack of clerical patronage, likewise offered degrees in theology or, latterly, in theology and religious studies. Theology was deemed to be a necessary part of a comprehensive university curriculum. It was not possible to study for a degree solely in religious studies until the second half of the 1960s (at Lancaster). Other universities followed suit, but not until the 1990s, with new departments and degrees in religious studies or the study of religions then

initiated at Bath Spa University College, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and the Open University. During the twentieth century, university teaching and learning on religion gradually moved away from a systematic theological model, including Church history and philosophy, to focus more on religions, social science and cultural approaches to their study, and contemporary themes.¹

More than forty higher education institutions now have departments, centres or other units which focus on the study of religion.² It is not unusual for religious studies and theology to be combined within a single department (such as ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ at Kings College, London, ‘Religions and Theology’ at Manchester, or ‘Theology and Religion’ at the University of Birmingham), and is quite common for them to be taught together within a single degree programme.

Increasingly, however, the study of religion forms part of broader interdisciplinary humanities and/or social science units, such as the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster, the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science at Leeds, or the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University. Small departments or subject areas have frequently been amalgamated by their universities to create larger units for reasons of efficiency and economy.

The conjunction ‘TRS’ has been widely used in the UK since the 1980s to refer to the breadth of higher educational provision related to the study of religion, despite perceived disciplinary and methodological differences between theology and religious studies.³ Steven Sutcliffe has referred to TRS as a ‘disciplinary-administrative rubric (...) under which title college and university programmes for the study of religion are categorized for funding, staffing, student applications and other disciplinary-administrative purposes’.⁴

1 This view of what constitutes university theological education is reflected in a widely used curriculum guide from 2011: Amy M. Russell, *Why Study Theology and Religious Studies*, HEA-PRS, 2011, 3-4, <http://www.theologysociety.org.uk/tdocs/557.pdf>, accessed 24 October 2016.

2 Forty-one units are registered with TRS-UK, the forum for discussing and representing issues relating to the teaching of theology and religious studies in the UK. ‘TRS-UK members and affiliates’, <http://trs.ac.uk/trs-members/>, accessed 23 October 2016.

3 S. Sutcliffe, ‘Introduction. Qualitative Empirical Methodologies: An Inductive Argument’, in S. Sutcliffe (ed.), *Religion: Empirical Studies*, Aldershot and Burlington VT – Ashgate, 2004, xvii–xliii, xxi.

4 Sutcliffe, ‘Introduction’, xxi.

Founded around 1990 as a consultative forum, the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (AUDTRS) changed its name in 2013 to embrace the compound 'TRS'.⁵ Like its predecessor, TRS-UK serves to bring together and support academics and departments as they undergo change (whether as a result of university restructuring, the allocation of funding, or the assessment of research or teaching). TRS-UK is not a disciplinary or subject area association akin to the British Association for the Study of Religions or the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group. Rather, it represents the institutional and public face of the academic study of religion in the UK in all its guises. It concerns itself with the career progression of academic theologians and religious studies scholars, and with the health, resilience and, sometimes, fate, of the university departments and schools in which they work. It lobbies Government, intervenes when a department of theology/religious is threatened with closure, and contributes to public debates and consultations about teaching and research quality.

Given that most individuals are wedded to their position as scholars of *either* theology *or* religious studies, how has it been possible for them to collaborate in TRS-UK at the expense of pursuing their disciplinary interests? First, the even-handedness of TRS-UK in representing both subject areas has been assured because its unit of membership is the university department or school rather than the individual scholar: the majority of these units include both religious studies scholars *and* theologians. Secondly, there is a general recognition that the wider public, including Government and the media, are not interested in what differentiates the two. In fact, it is held that vocalising internal differences is only likely to encourage a public strategy of divide and rule, leading to the likely closure of small departments. Hence, the importance of an instrumental approach in which a united front is presented, whilst behind it disciplinary differences pertain

This two-in-one strategy was recognised in 'Why Study Theology and Religious Studies' written in 2011 by Amy Russell on behalf of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy (HEA-PRS).⁶ In this guide for prospective students, Russell began

⁵ TRS-UK, <http://trs.ac.uk/> accessed 23 October 2016.

⁶ Russell, *Why Study Theology and Religious Studies*. The Higher Education Academy is a professional body for excellence in teaching and learning. <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

with the compound, TRS, but then moved on to its separate parts. In an encouraging tone, she remarked:

When you study theology and religious studies you look at what people believe, why people belong to particular religious traditions, how they practise their beliefs and what all of this has meant for our world in the past, and what it means for societies today. Theology and religious studies are studied by a variety of people, with and without religious beliefs.⁷

But she went on to add,

It is more appropriate to ask two separate questions – ‘What is theology?’ and ‘What is religious studies?’ – because they are two different but closely related subjects. Most scholars agree that the content and methods inherent to Theology and to Religious Studies differ considerably, but there is continuing debate about the significance and the extent of the difference.⁸

This led her to elaborate the distinctive histories of the two and their core components before setting out what a student might expect to do in a theology degree programme or a religious studies programme, whilst acknowledging that some schemes of study would include elements of both. What is evident here is that, even from the official vantage point of the HEA-PRS, the compound ‘TRS’ was a notional rubric important for engaging with a wider public, but not for describing a cohesive programme of study.

Beyond the administrative and collegial levels, there has been little formal engagement between theologians and religious studies scholars. They continue to be represented by different subject associations, chief among them the Society for the Study of Theology (SST), which focuses on the study of Christian theology, and the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), which promotes the academic study of religions.⁹ And, whilst a growing interdisciplinary and thematic approach to the study of religion is evident in networks, conferences and journals, a tribal mentality persists.

7 Russell, *Why Study Theology and Religious Studies*, 1.

8 Russell, *Why Study Theology and Religious Studies*, 1.

9 Society for the Study of Theology, <http://www.theologysociety.org.uk/index.asp>, accessed 24 October 2016; British Association for the History of Religions, <http://basr.ac.uk/>, accessed 24 October 2016. Others include the British Sociological Association, Sociology of Religion Study Group (SocRel), and associations for the study of Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

Nevertheless, assessing the disciplinary landscape, Steven Sutcliffe suggested that relations between theology and religious studies in the UK constituted a lively debate rather than an arena of conflict or hostility.¹⁰ This was borne out in 2006 in a conference entitled ‘Theology *and* Religious Studies and/or Theology *versus* Religious Studies?’¹¹ Representatives from both sides expressed their opinions and hopes concerning the relationship, and particularly on whether the two might ever legitimately become a single discipline. In the edited book that followed the conference, Denise Cush reflected on the various contributions to the debate, and concluded that the time was not yet right for full engagement or union.¹² Several interlocutors recommended a closer working relationship or even merger; but others remained decidedly in favour of one approach or the other and averse to any loosening of the boundary between the two, except for purely instrumental institutional reasons.

A socio-spatial analysis revealed the knowledge-power relationship between the two.¹³ Whether the focus was on the mission statements of subject associations (SST and BASR) or on introductory guides to the two disciplinary fields, it was evident that a significant gulf separated them. Theology continued to be the more convergent discipline, focused on ‘faith seeking understanding’ through a ‘systematic analysis of the nature, purposes and activity of God’.¹⁴ Religious studies was more inclusive of diverse methodological approaches, with the one exception of the ‘uninvited guest’: theology.¹⁵ Fear of incorporation by its older partner led religious studies exponents to vocalise their differences and assiduously police the boundary with theology whilst remaining relatively open to other disciplinary perspectives.

10 D. L. Bird, S. G. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in D. L. Bird, S. G. Smith (eds), *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education*, London and New York – Continuum, 2009, 1–14; Sutcliffe, ‘Introduction’, xxi.

11 *Theology and Religious Studies and/or Theology versus Religious Studies?* Oxford, 6–7 July 2006.

12 D. Cush, ‘Religious Studies *versus* Theology’, in D. L. Bird, S. G. Smith (eds), *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education*, London and New York – Continuum, 2009, 15–30.

13 K. Knott, ‘A Spatial Analysis of the Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies’, in D. L. Bird, S. G. Smith (eds), *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education*, London and New York – Continuum, 2009, 117–138.

14 The concepts of disciplinary ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ discussed in Knott, ‘A Spatial Analysis’, are borrowed from T. Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*, Milton Keynes – The Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University, 1989. Quotations are from D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids – Eerdmans, 1991, title page; A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, third edition, Oxford – Blackwell, 2001, 138.

15 Theology as the ‘uninvited guest’ was my response to Sutcliffe’s question ‘Who, if anyone, *cannot* be invited to table; who, if anyone, is to be excluded?’: Sutcliffe ‘Introduction’, xviii–xix.

Generally speaking, whilst theologians and religious studies scholars in the UK understood the need for collegial co-existence and joint representation to protect their institutional base and programmes of study, they considered themselves to be on different disciplinary paths with diverse methods, objectives and epistemological positions. They were content to be ‘TRS’ when necessary, for instrumental reasons, but remained either T or RS at heart.

Teaching and learning

The institutional drive in the 1990s and early 2000s to consolidate theology and religious studies for reasons of economy and efficiency was no better exemplified than in the activity of disciplinary ‘benchmarking’. Following its establishment in 1997, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education established a ‘quality code’ and ‘subject benchmarks’ as part of its strategy to assure the standards of teaching and learning in universities and colleges. A ‘Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Group’ was set up to review and make recommendations about the content of degree programmes in theology, religious studies and biblical studies. It published its report in 2000 (revised 2007), the *TRS Benchmark Statement*, in which the group defined what could be expected of a graduate in the subject, ‘in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies’.¹⁶

The introduction to the statement was informative in defining teaching, learning and knowledge in the combined subject area.¹⁷ The history and orientation of the two main disciplinary fields was described separately, acknowledging their differences. The various degree programmes on offer at UK universities were listed, again recognising that some offered either theology or religious studies, both, or something different, such as Islamic studies or Biblical studies.

Critically, however, no distinction was made between theology and religious studies when it came to listing how knowledge was to be promoted.

¹⁶ Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Group, 2007, *TRS Benchmark Statement*, second edition, Gloucester – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-theology-religious-studies.pdf>, accessed 24 October 2016, 1.

¹⁷ TRS Benchmarking Group, 6–9.

Theologians and religious studies scholars were no doubt able to identify some items of central importance to their own fields, such as the encouragement to ‘critically reflective practice in religious communities, as [students] negotiate their relations to their traditions and their wider social and geographic contexts’, or the need to stimulate ‘curiosity about and fascination for the variety of religious cultures across the globe, both past and present’.¹⁸ Other items, however, were less easily identifiable as pertaining to either theology or religious studies: such as ‘enabling in-depth study of the sacred, significant, popular and vernacular texts, history, practices and developed theology (or religious/philosophical thought) of one or more religious traditions’.¹⁹ And the same was true when it came to the TRS Benchmark Group’s description of social value and wider impact, knowledge and skills, teaching and learning methods, progression and assessment. No attempt was made to differentiate by theology or religious studies; they were simply offered in terms of TRS as a whole.

Two issues are noteworthy. First, in the UK, academics teaching in both theology and religious studies agreed to work together on this joint project. In doing so, they conceded areas of common ground whilst, where appropriate, protecting their own disciplinary interests. Secondly, in undertaking this initiative and publishing their results, they contributed to the production of ‘TRS’ as a combined subject area, incorporating both theology and religious studies.

Seen in retrospect, this undoubtedly constituted the major change in teaching and learning in the study of religions since the late 1960s when religious studies first emerged as an autonomous institutional presence in the UK. Nevertheless, the *TRS Benchmark Statement* represented the contemporary state of play in higher education departments and programmes as much as it innovated by creating something new.

Several other changes in teaching and learning were important too, the first being the move from language-based religious studies to a focus on contemporary religions, including non-religion. Until the 1970s (and 1980s in theology), students had been expected to learn a language as part of their BA degree programmes, whether a biblical language, Sanskrit, Pali or Qur’anic Arabic, and to use this in the exegesis and analysis of texts. This was removed

¹⁸ TRS Benchmarking Group, 6.

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as a requirement as the numbers entering higher education rose. Most entrants could see no relevance in learning an ancient language when their career paths were unlikely to require it. Mass higher education became more student-focused and less subject-focused. A student-focused curriculum was one that prioritised students' present and future needs. In the 1990s and 2000s, for example, as a response to teacher training requirements, university religious studies programmes sought to cover all the major religions present in the UK (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism).²⁰

More recently, the 'World Religions' paradigm has been criticised.²¹ The focus has now shifted to one in which the benefits of a grounding in 'religious diversity' are stressed, often with students' professional development and employability in mind. Degree programmes variously include modules on minority religions, new religions, indigenous religions, new spiritualities and varieties of non-religion. Islam has received more attention in the curriculum than other religions, with many universities appointing to academic posts in Islamic studies since 2000. Not all of these have been positioned within the context of religious studies; some have been in dedicated departments of 'Oriental Studies', 'Arabic and Islamic Studies', or 'Middle Eastern Studies', or even within 'Politics and International Relations' or 'Security Studies'. Whilst interest in Islamic studies may be driven by current affairs, news coverage and an awareness that Muslims in the UK constitute the second largest religious group, the popularity of Buddhist studies – now taught quite widely at undergraduate and postgraduate level – arises from personal interest. Buddhism is growing faster than most other religions in the UK.

Reflecting contemporary issues and the need for relevance, degree programmes also focus on religion in public life and global affairs, religion and education, science, migration, and conflict and violence. The focus on relevance, and the kind of training students of religion receive (in religious and cultural diversity, critical thinking and debate, awareness of reflexivity, sensitivity, distance and empathy), may help to explain why they go on to have an excellent graduate record across a broad range of professions.

20 In the UK, most students who wish to teach undertake a first degree (BA) in a discipline, followed by one or two further years of training to gain qualified teacher status.

21 See C.R. Cotter, D.G. Robertson (eds), *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, London and New York – Routledge, 2016. This volume, edited by two scholars based in the UK, critically examines the world religions paradigm and explores new pedagogical approaches in religious studies.

In many programmes, the problem of ‘religion’, and other theoretical and methodological issues, tends to be acknowledged in passing rather than being a primary focus. At undergraduate level, the integrity of the disciplinary field has given way to the things that interest and benefit students. A more in-depth consideration of method and theory awaits those students who continue with religious studies at masters and doctoral levels.

At the interface of teaching and research in religious studies in the UK, lies a remarkable learning project, drawn on by undergraduate and postgraduate students and staff alike. The Religious Studies Project (RSP) was founded in 2012 by two early career scholars (Christopher Cotter and David Robertson) ‘to help disseminate contemporary issues in RS to a wider audience and provide a resource for undergraduate students of RS, their teachers, and interested members of the public’.²² Through podcasts, essays, roundtable discussions, book reviews, resources, conference reports, and a weekly digest of job and other opportunities, the Religious Studies Project has focused on providing access to ‘the most important concepts, traditions, scholars and methodologies in the contemporary study of religion, without pushing a religious or nonreligious agenda’.²³ The podcasts – now numbering more than 170, are recordings of interviews by the RSP team with new and established scholars on a wide variety of subjects on religion and its study.²⁴

Although it receives support from the British Association for the Study of Religions, the RSP is now international in its team, content and reach, and shows that there is still enthusiasm and scope to develop the disciplinary autonomy of religious studies in the UK.²⁵

Research

As in other national contexts, although the study of religion may bring people together, the disciplinary lens, with its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, may keep them apart. This is reflected in the subject associations scholars have chosen to join and the conferences they attend. The

22 Religious Studies Project, ‘About us’, <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/about-us/>, accessed 31 October 2016.

23 Religious Studies Project, ‘About us’.

24 Religious Studies Project, ‘Podcasts’, <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/>, accessed 31 October 2016.

25 British Association for the Study of Religions, ‘Teaching and learning wiki’, <http://basr.ac.uk/basr-teaching-and-learning-wiki-innovative-pedagogy-and-legacy-resources/>, accessed 31 October 2016.

British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) remains the principal domain for religious studies scholars, but many may also be found, for example, in SocRel (Sociology of Religion Study Group) or BRISMES (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies). The BASR is affiliated to the International Association for the History of Religions and the European Association for the Study of Religions. It has a membership of around 250, runs annual conferences, and publishes a regular Bulletin and a journal (DISKUS).²⁶

Apart from the organisational efforts of subject associations, in the last two decades there have been two major institutional drivers of research on religion in the UK: the evaluation and assessment of university research, and the impact of public research funding.

The first major research assessment exercise in UK universities was conducted in 1986, and followed by further assessments in 1989, 1996, 2001, 2008 and 2014. Although the approach to assessment and evaluation, and the methods and measures used have differed on each occasion, the intention has remained broadly similar: to assess and rank the research quality of submissions made by universities to different disciplinary ‘units of assessment’ in order to allocate public funding based on research excellence. Assessment has been carried out chiefly by peer review, with the addition of some metrics: in the most recent exercise (the Research Excellence Framework or REF2014) it was based on a review of research environment, outputs (chiefly publications), and research impact.²⁷

According to a Government press release at the launch of a review of research funding in 2015, ‘international benchmarking has shown that past research assessment exercises have improved the quality of UK research’.²⁸ There is also general agreement among academics themselves that they have changed the conduct of research and when and where it is published. For example, research grant income has become an important measure, as have the number of doctoral completions. And, whilst the total number of publications per researcher or research unit has no relevance, quality does, with reviewers

26 British Association for the Study of Religions, ‘About the BASR’, <http://basr.ac.uk/>, accessed 31 October 2016.

27 REF2014, <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>, accessed 31 October 2016.

28 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-review-to-improve-university-research-funding>, accessed 31 October 2016.

grading outputs as world leading, internationally excellent, or recognised internationally or nationally. In REF2014, the impact of research beyond the academy was assessed, and in REF2021 open public access to research outputs (excluding books) will be a requirement. All of these factors have affected how individual researchers and research teams carry out their work, and how their universities monitor them.

‘Theology and Religious Studies’ has constituted a unit of assessment in previous exercises. In the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, the ‘Theology and Religious Studies sub-panel’ received 33 submissions from different UK universities, some from small units and others from those with 25 or more staff.²⁹ These submissions, and the overview report written following their assessment, provide information about university research in theology and religious studies in the period from 2009–2014.³⁰ They tell us, for example, how much research was conducted in religious studies as compared to theology, and what broad topics were popular among researchers. They also set out the social, cultural and economic impacts of research by scholars of religion.

When categorised according to subject area, the publications and other outputs submitted to the Theology and Religious Studies sub-panel for review in 2014 showed the following distribution:

Subject area	Percentage of outputs
Study of religions	23.5
Theology	21.5
Biblical studies	19.0
History	13.0
Philosophy	5.0
Sociology and anthropology	4.5
Ethics	4.5

²⁹ Universities were not required to submit research for assessment to REF2014, but ‘no submission, no research funding’. Of the forty-one UK universities registered as members of TRS-UK, eight did not make submissions for assessment to the ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ sub-panel.

³⁰ For the assessment results for ‘Theology and Religious Studies’, see <http://results.ref.ac.uk/Results/ByUoa/33>, accessed 31 October 2016. For the overview report, see REF2014, <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20D%20overview%20report.pdf>, accessed 24 October 2016.

Gender, media and education	4.0
Other (including method and theory)	5.0

**Table 1: Theology and Religious Studies sub-panel, REF2014:
Breakdown of outputs by subject area³¹**

The category ‘Study of religions’ included outputs on all the major ‘world’ religions, other Asian-origin religions, indigenous religions, spiritualities and general topics in religious studies. Submissions were particularly high in both Islamic studies and Buddhist studies, reflecting the growth in these areas in terms of both staff and curriculum coverage. Work on method and theory was included in the ‘Other’ category. The sub-panel reflected that there was,

(...) much evidence of research vitality in many of the areas of TRS in which submissions were returned (...). It noted impressive advances in terms of collaborations, interdisciplinary working, methodological sophistication and self-awareness and, in some areas, in the opening up of new ideas, approaches and agendas. This was not at the expense of scholarly work in such essential areas as textual work and the production of critical editions (in several languages), in-depth archival and other time-intensive work by specialist scholars.³²

Reporting on the public impact of research on religion, the sub-panel deemed that 37% of the examples (‘Impact Case Studies’) it assessed were ‘world-leading’ in quality.³³ This would sound over-blown and implausible were it not for the long history of public engagement by scholars of religion and theologians in the UK. The principal areas to benefit from this research impact were the third sector (charitable and voluntary bodies and NGOs), public bodies, education, arts organisations and museums, policy makers, the media, and health and other statutory agencies.³⁴ Impact was, in some cases, global or international as well as national or local.

³¹ Table based on information from the overview report on submissions to the Theology and Religious Studies sub-panel, REF2014, 77.

³² Overview report, 82–83.

³³ Overview report, 78. To view the Impact Case Studies for theology and religious studies, see <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/Results.aspx?UoA=33>, accessed 1 November 2016.

³⁴ Overview report, 78.

Social, cultural and economic impact is expected to remain a key factor in future research assessment processes. It is not hard to see why it has come to the fore and remained there. Universities are paid for by taxpayers, either through Government grants or fees paid by students and their families. Value for money, student satisfaction, and – in the context of research – impact are the measures by which the public benefits of higher education expenditure are assessed.

The second driver of change since 2000 has been public research funding. Research on religion benefitted from the formation, in 2005, of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), one of seven funding councils in the UK.³⁵ It attracted substantial grants for research projects, fellowships and doctoral awards, especially in association with the ‘Religion and Society Programme’.³⁶ Following academic and public consultation in 2004–2005, two research councils (the AHRC and the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC) joined together to fund the Programme. The consultation revealed that, compared to other subject areas, research on religion was of growing public importance but underfunded. With the aim of revitalising the study of religion in the UK under the banner of ‘Informing public debating and advancing understanding of religion in a complex world’, the Religion and Society Programme (2007–2013) received over £12 million, and supported 265 academics and researchers from 32 disciplines working across 75 projects (from small individual research grants and doctoral awards, to large scale collaborative projects of a multi-disciplinary nature).³⁷ It funded research on historical as well as contemporary topics, and on religions and religious groups in a variety of local and national contexts, as well as comparative projects. Led by Professor Linda Woodhead at Lancaster University, it helped to build capacity through the training of early career scholars, many of whom now have jobs in universities in the UK or beyond.³⁸

35 Arts and Humanities Research Council, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

36 Religion and Society Programme, <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

37 Religion and Society Programme, ‘About’, <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/about>, accessed 1 November 2016.

38 For example, Angela Connelly, University of Manchester; Niall Cunningham, Durham University; Siobhan McAndrew, University of Bristol; Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, King’s College, London; Sarah-Jane Page, Aston University; Hannah Rumble, University of Bath; Sonya Sharma, Kingston University; Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds; Teemu Taira, University of Helsinki.

Religion and Society projects produced a plethora of publications and other outputs (including exhibitions, performances, events and websites).³⁹ In addition, a new book series was launched, the Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series (now managed by Routledge).⁴⁰ Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto's edited volume on *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, a collaboration between scholars from within and beyond the programme, provided a comprehensive analysis and integrated approach to religion in the UK post-World War II. It offered a new interpretation of religious change that moved away from the dominant thesis on secularisation to a more modest one based on 'welfare utopianism'.⁴¹

The Religion and Society Programme also brought public debate on religion right to heart of the nation with the Westminster Faith Debates. The first series focused on religion in public life (including debates on diversity and identity, Religious Education and faith schools, radicalisation and terrorism), and the second on religion in private life (on gender, sexuality, the family, and assisted dying).⁴² Videos and podcasts, research essays, blog posts, media interviews and educational resources brought the debates to a much wider audience.⁴³ Their importance and influence was illustrated by the celebrity and calibre of the speakers, who included the Archbishop of Canterbury, ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair, various Government Ministers, chief editors of newspapers, rabbis and priests, policy makers and educationalists, and Richard Dawkins. From 2013, surveys by the market research company, YouGov, were conducted in association with each debate, with data gathered on a range of contemporary religious, spiritual and moral issues.⁴⁴

This highly public programme of research, together with the importance placed on impact in REF2014, illustrates the very considerable shift in recent decades from research in and for itself to research for public benefit. Whilst there has been an acceptance that some kinds of research are exploratory, theoretical and for academic rather than public engagement, there is now an

39 A selection can be viewed on the publications page of the Religion and Society website, <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications>, accessed 1 November 2016.

40 Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series, <https://www.routledge.com/Ashgate-AHRC-ESRC-Religion-and-Society-Series/book-series/ARELSOC>, accessed 1 November 2016.

41 L. Woodhead, R. Catto (eds), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, London and New York – Routledge, 2012. L. Woodhead, 'Introduction', 1–33, 24.

42 Westminster Faith Debates, <http://faithdebates.org.uk/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

43 Westminster Faith Debates; RE Online, 'Westminster Faith Debates', <http://www.reonline.org.uk/special-westminster-faith-debates/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

44 Westminster Faith Debates, 'Research', <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

acknowledgement in the UK that research on religion can make a difference beyond the academy. Increasingly, this extends to the translation of findings into accessible, publicly-available resources, and to the ‘co-production’ of research with non-academic stakeholders, both at home and abroad. A key example of the reach of this process has been the recent reorientation of research funding landscape away from the domestic arena towards global challenges and international development, in which research on religion has an important role to play.

Research, like teaching on religion, is now increasingly publicly directed and accountable. As a result, disciplinary differences, which continue to shape the careers and conduct of scholars of religion, have been subsumed beneath a ‘TRS’ flag of convenience.

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