



## Supporting Questioning in Theology and Religious Studies

Author: Kate Crosby, Stephen Pattison and Andrew Skilton

---

Journal Title: PRS-LTSN Journal

ISSN:

ISSN-L:

Volume: 2

Number: 1

Start page: 58

End page: 89

---

[Return to vol. 2 no. 1 index page](#)

---

This article is in two parts. In the first, we explore student perceptions of the conflict between following a particular faith and studying Theology and Religious Studies (TRS). This is set in the context of discussing such issues as the academic questioning agenda, multi-faith audiences, political correctness and offence. This section is based on our own observations and reflections, as well as student interviews and questionnaires. The empirical evidence presented is from a relatively small sample, designed to offer rudimentary indications, rather than a summative survey, of student responses to the issues under consideration. In the second, we propose a series of progressive exercises for use in seminars, designed to allow students to develop reflective awareness of the very nature of questioning. It is hoped that these exercises will give students more confidence and skill in posing and responding to questions, thereby improving their academic skills. At the same time, it is hoped that these exercises will make students more analytical of questions and possible responses, as well as the rationale for both. The aim here is to provide students with tools to analyse and manage experiences of conflict and offence that may arise while undertaking the academic study of religion. In both our discussion and exercises, we are interested in the practical implications of the insider/outsider problem for teaching and learning, rather than the theory or implications for research into religions<sup>1</sup>.

# Part One: Discussion

## The challenge of questioning in TRS

'Critical understanding' is a learning outcome universally valued in UK higher education, and is particularly emphasised in the self-description of humanities subjects. Yet when the subject in question is TRS, a critical approach risks undermining or at least being perceived to undermine the very subject under scrutiny. In no other subject does the academic agenda confront so fundamental an aspect of the individual's identity. When experienced as such, this confrontation can lead to some questionable responses. Students may withdraw from the academic process to protect their faith, or focus on 'safe subjects', such as philology. They may suspend critical judgement because of a lack of clarity between political correctness and non-critical thinking. In contrast, they may become alienated from their own faith background, even transferring their faith onto the academic process as a substitute worldview. Such responses may even guide career choices. At the milder level, the student may simply have an experience of unease. These responses mean that the academic study of the subject can lead to the very opposite of the explicitly intended outcome: the suppression rather than the mastery of a critical approach. Is it possible to develop the capacity for questioning and the critical faculty in TRS students in such a way that they have a greater degree of autonomy in their reactions to this process?

Asked in individual interviews about their concerns regarding asking and answering questions in class, students most commonly assumed that other students in the group knew more than they did. They were therefore anxious about making a fool of themselves or taking up time more valuably filled by others. Other factors identified were that they did not fully understand what was expected; an unwillingness to challenge an authority figure (sometimes expressed in terms of offending the lecturer); and that discussions tended to move on before they had had time to formulate their thoughts. These concerns might be found in any lecture theatre, but TRS adds an additional layer of anxiety found in students' responses: the fear of exposing very personal aspects of oneself to an audience that is not necessarily sympathetic; potentially misrepresenting their beliefs in a context where statements cannot easily be recovered or withdrawn, or, on the other hand, offending against the anticipated beliefs of others, including the lecturer. Our intention here is to explore these issues, namely the experience of questioning and being questioned in higher education, and the particular difficulties posed by doing this in the TRS context.

A further related issue of concern to us as TRS teachers is whether or not the types of questions raised in TRS fulfil the quests with which students enter their degrees. If we accept that soteriological truth—whether or not we subscribe to it—is ultimately experiential, beyond the limits of shared rational argument and impossible to prove on the basis of empirical evidence, we acknowledge that those aspects of a religion often prioritised as the most fundamental by its adherents are not directly subject to academic scrutiny. Does this agnostic stance regarding the 'fundamentals' (e.g. the salvific experience of ultimate truth) lead us to analyse only the safe 'peripherals' (e.g. what people say about salvific experience of the ultimate truth)? To what extent do students enter TRS motivated by questions that are not addressed by the subject? To what extent do students feel disillusioned by the agenda of the questions that are addressed?

## Student Perceptions of TRS

Most of us who teach TRS will at some point have been faced by a student who finds the conflict between their personal faith and the academic study of it in some way problematic. We may have had that experience ourselves. We begin with two personal responses to the academic study of the individual's own faith that exemplify the extremes of alienation. We shall then analyse a broader range of feedback to see if this sense of alienation is that of the majority or rather of the minority, perhaps a vociferous one. The accounts are précis of real interviews. Student A is a first year, confronting and developing their responses to the conflicts they experience in TRS for the first time<sup>3</sup>. Student B finished their undergraduate studies some time ago, and felt that it had taken much of the intervening time to recover their faith from the damage done by academic study. Student B nevertheless returned to pursue advanced

### **Student A**

?I chose to do TRS to find out more about my own religion and to gain a better understanding of the religion of others. My experience of the teaching of my own faith in the first year has led me to decide to focus on language learning in my second and third year. I want to be able to gain direct access to the writings of important teachers within my tradition. I also want to avoid studying my own faith. Why should I be taught my religion by those who have no religious experience in it? How can they claim to represent a religion when they have no personal understanding? Someone with real experiential knowledge can present the truth and defend it. If people say they do not believe it, then let them prove it wrong: they can only do so with a false rationality, not my rationality. Each religion taught should be taught by someone with direct spiritual experience within the tradition. Yes, it would be practically difficult?you would need a lot of teachers. To have a religious experience in one tradition does not make one a better teacher of another tradition. The empathy it might provide for the validity of religious experience is insufficient, because they still cannot say what the experience of that religious truth is actually like.?

This account expresses a tension between adhering to a faith and studying it academically, a tension that focuses on the issue of valid authority. Particularly interesting for the current discussion is that the position outlined here was the student's starting point. The student, who is high achieving, quickly developed a more considered response as a result of engaging in discussion about it. For example, the student expressed the view that a lecturer with an appreciation of the soteriological significance of one tradition might be better than one hostile to spiritual issues, even when lecturing on a faith other than his/her own. The student decided to pursue some courses in their own religion after all.

### **Student B**

?I began studying Buddhism in order to explore my own faith further, but at the same time I was quite young and ready to be impressed by the experts with whom I studied. As such, I did not defend my faith even to myself and I was not particularly defensive, unlike some of the other students from a faith background. Quite soon I became disenchanted through my studies, partly because some of the texts I read in the expectation of spirituality seemed in fact to be quite petty, but mainly because of the attitude of the teachers. They seemed to have a universal dislike of religions. Some of them appeared to regard it as their job to destroy the faith of their students, and they even claimed to have made bets on how long it would be before students who entered their degree as a monk (particularly a Buddhist monk) would disrobe. When a monk did disrobe, especially if he also got married, one of my teachers in particular would congratulate himself on a job well done. Being a 'good' student, I copied the cynicism of my teachers quite well, not having the strength of character to withstand it. However, I found that, while this approach destroyed, it did not replace what it destroyed with anything else. The vacuum was filled with a sense of intellectual superiority and academic elitism, which of course provides no framework for making moral decisions. For some students, perhaps me included initially, I think their response was to transfer the faith they had had in their religion to their academic teachers. This became apparent at a meeting arranged by those of us who were both Buddhists and students, in order to discuss what it was like to be

both. There were about 15 of us, including a few interested non-Buddhists. The subject of the perceived cynicism of our teachers, two of whom were known to have been partly motivated by faith interest in their own early studies, was raised. One of the non-Buddhists asked, 'Well, if they hate it so much, why don't they do something else instead?' There were two, diametrically opposite responses from among the Buddhists. One replied, cynically, 'Because it's a job. It's well paid and they don't want to have to go back and start again. They wouldn't be able to do anything else.' The other replied, 'They do it because they are *bodhisattvas* (i.e. those Buddhists who have vowed to sacrifice themselves to bring others to Enlightenment).' She was completely serious. She had transferred her faith to the academics and entirely bought into their projected superiority. For me, this was the final straw that led me to withdraw from engagement with these inappropriately charismatic teachers. The lack of a framework for moral decisions had already led me to behave in ways that felt completely alien: I had ceased to recognise or like myself. It took me several years after my degree to restore fully my confidence in the validity of my faith and my application of it. A more useful theme also arose out of that meeting. Most of us acknowledged that our very engagement in the academic study of our faith was itself a symptom of a certain degree of alienation. We were already on a particular trajectory. For the monks who got married religious studies was not the turning point on the road to Damascus, but a single point on the journey after that turn had already been taken.?

The perceived clash between the authority of the religion and the authority and integrity of academic teachers in TRS is again the main theme of this account, although here the focus appears to be the validity of a moral agenda rather than personal experience as such. Again, what is of particular relevance to our current discussion is that the process of discussing the conflict between study and faith, and analysing the agenda of both students and staff was a liberating experience for student B. Both students appear to have had specific, if unvoiced, expectations of their teachers in TRS which had been disappointed<sup>4</sup>. Discussion of the issues helped them to identify their own stance and locate themselves within the TRS spectrum.

While these experiences of the conflict between faith and academic study are strong enough to have affected significant decisions in the above two case studies, we wanted to know if the experience of a conflict between TRS and pursuing a particular religion was universal. In our survey we targeted a range of students at different levels of study, at two institutions, one of which teaches Study of Religions, the other of which combines Theology with Religious Studies. Two types of questionnaire were distributed to different groups of students. There was some overlap in the questions, but the first had more open questions while the second specifically sought students' motivation for studying TRS and whether or not students compartmentalise or 'write in bad faith'. These questionnaires were intended to provide us with indications as to whether or not the considerations we felt to be at issue in studying TRS were also perceived as such by students. The results should in no way be regarded as statistically representative, for which more thorough investigation is required. Questionnaires were returned by 50 students. Ten of these were responses to the second questionnaires.

Slightly over half of those who expressed an opinion on the subject (21) did not think the study of religion was entirely compatible with the spiritual or religious pursuit of the religion studied, while 18 thought it was compatible. Students were more likely to view the two as incompatible if they were questioned as part of a course on religion and gender, i.e. on a course specifically focused on questioning religious authorities and assessing claims of universal truth and infallibility. Some students explained the reasons for their view that they are incompatible. They highlighted the introduction of doubt about the infallibility of aspects of one's religion; misunderstanding and consequent misrepresentation on the part of lecturers who do not practise the faith on which they lecture; an unstated assumption that personal religiosity should be suppressed for 'academic' purposes; and the view that some faiths deliberately

prevent full engagement with academic study. These indicate four areas of incompatibility: undermining authorities within the faith with a historical/outsider perspective; misrepresentation through the outsider perspective; the suppression or compartmentalisation of the insider position to maintain the outsider stance; and the refusal of the insider to countenance the outsider perspective. Those who expanded on their view that the two stances are compatible highlighted two main reasons for this: that academic study and spiritual pursuit of a religion are such different approaches that the former cannot touch the latter; and that finding out more about one's own or another religion increases one's understanding in a positive way. Three respondents indicated that academic study was a useful and appropriate component of pursuing one's faith, although insufficient in itself.

Most respondents thought that academic study of religions could undermine religious belief (33, in contrast to 7 who did not). However, half of these qualified their statements with a range of comments along the following lines: that undermining faith was a good thing; that whether or not it was possible depended on such factors as whether or not the faith had a poor foundation and whether one was already on a trajectory out of the religion. One student mentioned how distressing it could be to find out about the corruption and violence in the history of a religion. A couple of students mentioned the potential confusion of academic knowledge for faith. A few pointed out the hostility of some TRS lecturers to religion and one pointed out the preoccupation of academia with reducing the supernatural to the explainable. Two students also identified manipulative motives and the projection of academia as a substitute superior worldview, a point related to the danger of academic knowledge becoming a 'false faith' mentioned above. Two students highlighted the dangers of 'a liberal perspective'.

Before we conclude from this that TRS should be avoided by anyone wishing to maintain a spiritual perspective, we should note that an even higher number of respondents (35 in contrast to 5) thought TRS could affirm religious belief. Three key reasons were given: it broadens and enriches one's understanding; questioning one's beliefs means one accepts them on the basis of reasoning as well as faith; awareness of the similarity of other faiths confirms one's own beliefs as universal as well as making one more accepting of others' beliefs.

While half of students identified changes in their religious views since taking up TRS, most identified this as a positive outcome: that their views were strengthened or that they were more accepting of other religions or of religion generally. In the words of one student who did not come to study from a particular faith perspective: 'I do not dismiss the concept of religious or spiritual practice any more.' Some students stated that they were now less likely to identify with a particular religion because what they valued in their own could also be found in others. These findings, while perhaps hard to test in a formal context, affirm aspirations expressed in the TRS benchmarking statement that TRS graduates develop an empathetic understanding of other worldviews as a result of their degree. It also suggests that the analysis of religions in TRS does not induce a dismissive attitude to religion in most students, as might have been anticipated. Interestingly, 7 out of the 10 students asked reported that they felt they were still formulating their beliefs.

In terms of whether or not TRS degree schemes raised the questions students had anticipated exploring in their studies, an exactly equal number (40%) said they did to those who said they did not. 20% claimed that they had no prior expectations. Nevertheless, nearly half of the group that did not feel the questions raised were those they had anticipated also indicated that the questions raised were better than anticipated, and a fifth identified the unexpected nature of their studies as the complexity and level of theory over engagement with specific religions. This means that just over 10% were specifically dissatisfied with the questions raised in the academic study of religion.

## **Impact of student diversity on the challenge of TRS teaching**

The range of expressed religious belief among the student body is in itself significant in assessing the reasons for these experiences of the incompatibility between academic study and pursuing a faith. In teaching religious studies, one is presenting the 'other', the subject under study. In doing so, one is empathetically engaging with the internal structure of that other and interpreting it and its significance to the audience which thinks within another, external structure. Whether one personally begins from inside or outside the tradition, one is translating from one structure to the other. This task is challenging in itself, but it becomes more complicated by far when the 'other' is also the

audience, and the audience has no single structure of reference, as in the case in today's multicultural, multi-religious, worldview-eclectic student body. Putting someone's own experience or view back to them in one's own words is notoriously fraught with dangers. If one only speaks to and of oneself, one continues to apply only internal structures, thereby failing to communicate the other to the audience. In this way one only confirms one's own worldview. (Of course, some argue that this is what we do anyway.) By what mechanism can one translate to several different audiences within different structures and with different historical authorities, when one may only communicate to them collectively in a single speech in their joint company? The following chart indicates the range of faith positions found within our student body. Significantly, while there were more people who identified themselves as Christian than as of another religion, no single religion was dominant in our sample. Roman Catholics seemed to indicate themselves as such, rather than as Christian, but have been included under 'Christian' here. We should note that most indications of a specific religious affiliation were heavily qualified, and that most respondents would presumably therefore find their position in the table below a gross over- simplification. This is of significance in the problems outlined above, because of the different voices within a single named affiliation, even if one is, for example, teaching a Theology subject to an entirely Christian group.

<b>Statement re: religion</b>	<b>No. of respondents (out of 50)</b>
Chose not to indicate religion	4
Indicated had no religious affiliation	9
Buddhist/Buddhist leanings	9
Christian/Christian leanings	16
Consciously eclectic	3
General South Asian religions/Hindu leanings	2
Jewish	1
Materialist	1
Muslim	2
New Age	1
Non-denominational belief in a universal deity	2

## **Offence**

In connection with the increased challenge of teaching TRS presented by this diversity in the student body, one strand of the complex of issues running through the reflections which led us to conduct this study is concerned with 'offence'. We are particularly interested in the nature and value of 'taking offence' at questions raised about a student's (or lecturer's) own faith. With this in mind, questions were included in the two questionnaires addressing this issue more or less directly. The next paragraph summarises the authors' initial reflections on aspects of 'offence' in the TRS context. This is followed by a summary of pointers arising from our survey, which we see as the initial orientation-finding phase in what should probably be an ongoing investigation into this issue.

The assumption of a single, Judeo-Christian religious background for all TRS students has in theory long been untenable, as is confirmed by the statistics on students' backgrounds recorded above. Nevertheless, all three authors had heard current student complaint that an assumption of a Christian background still pertained in some classes on Christianity. The religious diversity among students comes not just from more or less easily identified ethnic

'minorities' but also from converts whose ethnicity has no relationship to their expressed belief. The assumption complained about was that some lecturers assumed a Christian orientation among white students.

Among those aware of the multi-religious audience and desiring to avoid offence, the view and expectation of both students and staff seems to be that the safest position for teachers in TRS is a neutral one of relativist agnosticism: presenting different religious groups as holding to a truth that 'works for them' expressive of an aspiration to engage in 'objective' intellectual discourse in which we claim to 'teach about' rather than 'teach' the subject. This might seem at odds with the committed, value-laden nature of the subject, which is often what attracts students to its study. This position tends to be adopted in its defensive form rather than as a positive hermeneutic strategy, although it clearly implies one if examined critically itself. From a teacher's perspective, we had gained a strong impression that some converts expressed a greater degree of sensitivity on religious matters than so-called ethnic representatives, and we are interested by the specific causes of this in a TRS context.

In popular (i.e. non-TRS) discourse, perhaps reflecting the perceived collapse of universal values in the post-modern period, 'passion', i.e. the capacity for intense emotion and ease to anger, has become an increasingly common term of approbation: 'The Welsh are so passionate about their language!', 'He was a passionate defender of his cause!', 'What was so wonderful about Barbara Castle was her passion!' Here the term functions to establish personal and cultural authenticity to be passionate about anything is deemed worthy, and to mark out the passionate person from the apathetic, lacklustre, aimless norm. In the religious sphere, similarly, passion is often seen as a positive attribute. Religious sensitivity, as the capacity for offence, thus becomes a badge of honour for the religious party who establishes their credentials as a holy, spiritual or religious person by the depth and vociferousness of their offence. In the political sphere, offence takes this popular discourse a further step, by linking positive notions about passion revealing 'commitment' and authentic religious belief, to the liberal humanistic agenda of freedom of speech and freedom from persecution. The often unstated legal background to this is British blasphemy law (in practice not extended beyond the defence of Anglicanism), in which blasphemy is deemed to have taken place not when certain statements are made, but when an individual or individuals take offence at certain statements being made. This context can be seen as facilitating the independent role of 'zealotry' in any religious tradition.

At its worst, 'offence' can determine an unspoken agenda regarding debate in TRS. Unacknowledged fear of offending particular religious interest groups has the potential to distort the assumed universal commitment to critical questioning in the Humanities. Offence cannot be dismissed as a factor in the dynamic of TRS teaching, as much as anything because of its potential for disruption at class and institutional levels.

Is there a positive place for 'offence' in TRS? This could be answered in two ways. Instances of offence were considered to have been positive points of intellectual and personal growth by all the authors, who agreed that this could be the 'least comfortable form of learning', but at the same time, the most productive. There is also the possibility that the taking of offence can act as a brake on the more cynical degrees of the questioning agenda, although it is by no means our view that offence is the best such restraint. All the authors have positive personal religious positions, and so these views are not expressed through indifference or hostility to religious belief.

It remained an open question as to how the individual teacher should deal with offence in the classroom. Clearly the intellectual issues need to be separated from those of physical safety and legal responsibility.

## ***Student Experience of Offence***

The following is a brief summary of comments potentially relevant to the subject of offence elicited from the questionnaires. These results are not offered as statistically significant, but instead as suggestive of the value of further research in this topic. The majority of respondents were second or third year Honours students.

38 students responded to the first of the following questions about offence, most also responded to some of the four follow-up questions:

- Have you ever found anything that happened as part of a study of religions course religiously offensive?
- Was it offensive to you personally or to others?
- Were staff or fellow students the source of the offence?
- Was it mildly or seriously offensive?
- What was the nature of the offence?

Twenty-one of these said they had never experienced anything religiously offensive in their courses. Of the seventeen who said they had, four experienced the offence as serious. Six people indicated that both staff and students had caused offence. Four indicated that only fellow students were the source of the offence, while three that only staff had caused offence. One person indicated particular textbooks as the only source of offence. One of the three respondents who indicated that the offence was only to themselves personally raised the question, 'How do I know whether or not someone else's offence is religious?' However, ten students had taken offence on behalf of others, two of these exclusively so.

Causes of offence included the following, given in order of frequency. Some students did not specify, or not fully enough for us to be reasonably clear about their views, while some gave more than one answer.

- assumption of a (Christian) faith background?4
- lecturer/ students specifically ridiculing beliefs of students?4
- stereotyping/uninformed presentation of a religion?3
- social cliques based on religious background?3
- the assumption of one form of a specific religion as higher than other forms?2
- lack of awareness of religions or perspective outside the lecturer's own focus?2
- intolerance or dogmatism among fellow students?2
- lecturers assuming that a literal belief in the bible was immature/unacademic?2
- general anti-Christian ethos?2
- general anti-religion ethos?2
- offensive on basis of gender or sexuality?2
- general anti-Muslim ethos?1

Two Buddhists expressed offence at the teaching of their own religion on the grounds of presumed invalid assumptions or lack of personal experience of Buddhism on the part of their teachers and/or fellow students. Interestingly, in doing so, they expressly made the very same invalid assumptions. Although converts and therefore not immediately identifiable as from an ethnic background where one might stereotypically anticipate Buddhist affiliation, they assumed they were in a minority. Buddhism was in fact the most commonly expressed religious interest among students in the group and the owned faith background of at least one of the lecturers in question.

Only the second questionnaire specifically asked students whether they avoided modules on their own faith, found modules of their own faith or other faiths uncomfortable, or ever wrote in 'bad faith'. Here it is important to bear in mind that only 10 responses to this questionnaire were returned. 3 of the respondents, all Christian, experienced discomfort in studying their own religion. 3 experienced discomfort studying the religions of others, of whom 2 volunteered that they are Christian. 4 students indicated that they wrote essays in bad faith, i.e. 'in a voice or from a perspective that you adopt for academic purposes, but with which you do not agree?' However, 3 of these thought this could be a good experience, while just 1 person thought it was bad because it they felt unable to express their personal



beliefs.

In the first questionnaire students were asked whether they thought it was better to be taught by a) a lecturer who is a member of the faith about which they lecture, or b) by one who is not a member of that faith. The responses elicited indicated flaws in this question. For example, some students assumed that a lecturer who is a member of the faith meant a non-academic. Therefore, the second questionnaire rephrased the question giving 4 options: ?Do you think courses about specific faiths should be taught by: practitioners, academics, both, people who are both.?

As far as we can judge from the responses given, bearing in mind the flaws in our questioning, preferences were divided as follows:

<b>Courses about specific faiths should be taught by:</b>	<b>No. of Respondents (out of 50)</b>
practitioners	1
academics	8
both practitioners and academics	7
people who are both practitioners and academics	17
irrelevant, only subject knowledge etc. matters	11
no expressed opinion	6

The range of comments and reasons given for the judgements made on this topic suggest this is worthy of further investigation. For example, some students thought that an academic should not lecture on their own religion. Those who thought it was irrelevant prioritised different qualities as the most important: subject knowledge, empathy, absence of empathy/bias, knowledge of their own underlying assumptions, enthusiasm and the ability to teach well. A couple of those who indicated that they preferred lecturers from the faith background on which they taught indicated that they were aware of their own bias. They acknowledged that they liked the lecturers in question because what they said was more likely to be in accordance with their own opinions since they were of the same faith.

## **An addition to a reflexive TRS syllabus?**

The most informative aspect of the exercises undertaken here is not the individual responses to the questionnaires, but the length of those responses and the enthusiastic welcome expressed for the discussion of this issue. Several students took time to add notes or make comments of appreciation that the topic had been raised at all. The responses included sophisticated considerations of the issues far beyond what can be included in this brief discussion. This suggests that the issues raised here are significant considerations to many students of TRS. There is clearly a debate on these topics going on either consciously or unconsciously in the minds of many students, a debate that is to a large extent untapped and unacknowledged in TRS curricula. TRS departments could usefully include these topics in the syllabus because they are directly relevant to TRS and as a means of harnessing energy into active student debate. Where explicit sustained critical awareness of the subject is currently included in TRS curricula it tends to be included in the abstract: about the views and application of particular theories, rather than as an immediately practical issue. Recent trends to define the subject and to develop curricula to provide students with a reflexive understanding of what is involved in TRS have moved curricula towards the teaching of theory and methodologies of religion. While this is often welcome and does increase critical awareness of scholarship in the subject, it can sometimes prove alienating. It seems to us that reflection on the practical implications of studying TRS along the lines proposed here is an alternative or additional means of developing the desired reflexivity. It could be used, for example, to frame more theoretical debates, by providing students with direct experience of why theory about the study of religion is worthy of investigation. The following section provides exercises on questioning that

might be used as part of this process of reflection.

## Part Two: Exercises

### Asking Questions? Introduction to the exercises

Asking questions generally and adopting a critical attitude to all aspects of the study of religions is part of the taken for granted worldview of teachers. However, we perhaps forget that our interrogatory habits and assumptions are themselves open to critical evaluation. Furthermore, the habits of questioning and being critical have to be learned at some point. We cannot assume that students will understand the value or purpose of critical questioning, let alone be able to engage positively with asking or responding to questions, simply by osmosis. The philosophy and craft of engaging in and with critical questioning needs to be taught actively if students are to be given equal opportunity to develop these skills. If students understand the processes involved in questioning and are able to analyse questions, they are more likely to develop confidence and skill in their use of and responses to different types of questions.

Our suggestion is that students need to be worked through a series of stages in which they build up a self-conscious, articulate appraisal of the place of questioning within higher education generally and religious studies in particular. This process is probably most appropriately undertaken in the first year. It would most obviously fit best with general courses introducing students to methods in religious and theological studies. However, the questions raised in each stage could be adopted and adapted in a variety of courses according to the needs of teachers and students. It might, indeed, be very helpful to come back to them at the end of a three-year course to see whether students had changed their perspectives.

Below, we simply outline the stages and place beneath them the questions that might be raised. We envisage that teachers might choose to work through some or all of these questions in classes or seminar groups, either in well-defined blocks or perhaps in regular short slots. Many of the questions can be worked on by individuals as class preparation, or they could be adopted for use in twos, small groups, or even whole classes. The important thing for any teacher proposing to use them is that it should be made quite clear to students in advance to what extent they will be required to share their answers with others, and in what ways. This will sustain confidence and trust among learners. There is a good case for saying that students should only be required to share what they wish and so activities that go beyond the individual should not violate that boundary. The words 'critical' and 'questioning' are, at least in many people's minds, very threatening, particularly in the context of studying TRS. The whole purpose of creating a critical syllabus about questioning will be defeated if learners are not secure in feeling that they know what is being asked of them and what use will be made of their contributions.

### The Stages of the Exercise-brief overview

The stages outlined in this hypothetical syllabus of exercises on questioning in TRS move from a focus on individual learners and where they start from in terms of knowledge and experience of questioning to a more objective and subject-centred consideration of the nature of questions and questioning particularly in TRS. Even at the latter end of the scale, the learner's experience and attitudes are of great importance; part of the purpose of working through this syllabus is to deepen students' awareness of their own place and attitudes within this discipline.

**Stage 1: Student experience and attitudes towards questions and questioning.** It is important to be learner centred if one wants individuals to know themselves and understand their own responses to questions and questioning. The first part of the questioning syllabus therefore asks learners to reflect upon themselves and their own experience so that they can articulate their own pre-understandings about these matters. No previous teaching or specific knowledge is required.

**Stage 2: Questioning in the academic context.** This stage of the process encourages students to continue to reflect

on their own experience and pre-understandings about questions and questioning, but also invites them to reflect upon the general academic context in which they are now situated. The range and nature of the questions asked also begins to introduce reflection specifically on questions that might arise particularly in religious studies without requiring specific 'owned' answers about the content of these questions from new students.

**Stage 3: The nature and purpose of questions and questioning.** It is often assumed that students understand why questions and critical appraisal are part of classroom teaching. In this part of the syllabus, students are required to think about the nature and purpose of questioning and how they might assess, and respond to, different kinds of questions. The movement towards greater breadth and context is continued in very general terms.

**Stage 4: Questioning in religion and religious studies.** By this point, probably well into a first semester, it is appropriate to invite students to begin to reflect more directly upon the nature and functioning of questions and questioning in relation to religion and religious faith. Students should by now be a) familiar with reflecting upon their own experience and b) reasonably confident about sharing their views with others. So they should be ready to begin to address critical issues and challenges of faith and ideology (or the lack of it) within this discipline.

**Stage 5: Challenge and offence in religion and religious studies.** The final stage of this introduction to questioning encourages students to push their critical thinking about questioning and questions within the discipline to the point where they consider the nature of offence. What sort of questions and statements cause or might cause offence in religious studies? What are the reasons for this? Can one distinguish between challenging and offending religious views? How does this impact on students as individuals and as a group?

## The Stages of the Exercises for Students with Explanatory Comments7

### Stage 1. Student experience and attitudes towards questions and questioning

#### *Questioning*

Throughout your university career you will be asked questions verbally and in writing. You will also be encouraged to ask questions of teachers and material. The aim of this process is to help you to learn better and to think critically for yourself. If you learn to ask the right sorts of questions it is hoped that you will become a critical independent thinker better able to evaluate and find things out for yourself in future.

So much for the theory. In practice, some people find questions and questioning uncongenial or difficult. The aim of this exercise is to help you to think a little bit about the nature of questions and questioning so that you understand your own reactions and feelings about them better. This might enable you to decide better how much you want to join in posing and answering questions during and after your education.

We start with your own feelings, interest and difficulties in dealing with questions so you can take stock of your own reactions and recognise your own style. You may want to change this, at least some of the time, once you can articulate it more accurately to yourself. Then we will go on to look at the reasons why questioning is used in education and what you and others might get out of it.

But first, it is worth stating the following: ***A genuine question, whether written or spoken, is a demand requiring a response.***

A question literally asks something of you; it may require energy and willingness to respond. You can always decide not to respond to a demand. If you do respond it will take some work and effort, however slight. The reason for pointing this out is that, by definition, questions are bound to be demanding! Any demand may be unwanted, intrusive or unwelcome. It is not surprising, therefore, that some people may feel that they don't like them. Perhaps you feel that way yourself. Let's move on to examine your attitude to being questioned and how you deal with the apparent

demand for some kind of response or answer.

### ***Your attitudes and responses to questions and their effects on you***

Some people love posing and answering questions, others seem to shy away from them. The purpose of the first part of this exercise is to help you to recognise how you feel about and respond to questions.

Spend a few minutes jotting down notes in response to the following questions. Please remember there are no right or wrong answers to the questions. They are there simply to help you think about your own experience and responses, so don't get hung up if you find them meaningless or too difficult, just move on.

- Would you say that you were a person who likes **asking** questions? What sort of questions do you like to ask? Write down a few examples if you can. It might help to answer this point if you were to think about the sorts of conversations you have with other people in everyday life.
- Would you say that you are a person who likes **answering questions**? Can you give examples of the sorts of questions that you like considering or being asked? Again, it might help to think about the sorts of real life conversations and experiences that you have had.
- In what sort of contexts and with what sorts of people do you feel happy and confident to ask and answer questions? (e.g. with friends, with fellow students, at home, with strangers, in the police station, in the pub, with your family, in the classroom, with a telesales person, etc.)
- In what sorts of contexts and with what sorts of people do you feel less happy and confident? (e.g. with friends, with fellow students, at home, with strangers, in the police station, in the pub, with your family, in the classroom, with a telesales person, etc.)
- Comparing your answers to the last 2 questions, what do you think are the main differences between the people and contexts that enable or inhibit your engagement in questioning and answering?
- Who are the people and what are the contexts that you find most inhibiting for posing and answering questions? What is your worst nightmare context for this activity? (e.g., being interrogated by the police in a prison cell, having to answer a question in a room full of strangers, etc.)
- Is it more difficult to be asked questions by some individuals or kinds of people than by others? List the individuals and types of people that you would most like to avoid in this context.

## **Stage 2. Questioning in the academic context**

- How do you feel when someone (teacher or fellow student) asks you a question in an academic context? Casting your mind over your experience, you may be able to think of a variety of responses that you have had. Write down some examples of your best and worst moments in answering questions? why do you think some experiences may have been positive and others more difficult?
- Do you worry about being asked questions in the academic context? Can you say why you might feel anxious?
- If you do not worry about being asked questions in the academic context, why do you think this is?
- How do you feel about being asked questions in public by teachers or lecturers? Why do you think you have the feelings you have?
- Look down the list of questions below. Underneath each one write a comment on how you would feel about being asked the question in a lecture or seminar. How would you react to the questioner? Try to say why you would have this feeling/reaction. Please note whether any particular questions make you feel uncomfortable or threatened in any way and try to note down why. Some of them would probably never be asked, but try to think

through your reactions anyway.

- Do you believe in God?
- Are you gay or straight?
- What kind of god or gods do you believe in?
- So you're a Buddhist, are you?
- Are you a vegetarian?
- Would you like the window closed or open?
- So that's your view is it?
- What were the names of the 12 tribes of ancient Israel?
- What are the ethical implications of holding a theistic or non-theistic religious viewpoint?
- What is today's date please?
- Surely you can't really believe in re-incarnation?
- What do you think about the possibilities of life after death?
- Where's your homework?
- Who is the Dalai Lama?

**Possible Feedback:** You would probably be able to answer some of these questions with one-word answers quite easily and willingly, e.g., What is today's date? This sort of question requires common knowledge. Also, you probably wouldn't be too worried if you didn't know the answer.

Others you might find more difficult to answer if you do not have specific subject knowledge, e.g., What were the names of the 12 tribes of Israel? This might be because you do not really have the knowledge to answer it, perhaps because you have not yet covered the ground taught. Answering this kind of question requires subject knowledge.

Questions such as, What are the ethical implications of holding a theistic or non-theistic religious viewpoint? probably require a lengthy answer with a good deal of supporting subject knowledge. You are unlikely to know the answer to a question like this if you have not studied a subject in depth.

Questions such as, What do you think about the possibilities of life after death? are elicitive questions to which there is no right or wrong answer. The questioner may be trying to engender a general discussion in which people offer different points of view and they may not need much pre- or subject knowledge to be able to engage with the question.

Some questions may be difficult to answer because they seem very personal or threatening, e.g., Are you gay or straight? What kind of god or gods do you believe in? You might feel that they are so invasive that they are inappropriate and that you are not willing to answer them, particularly in a public context.

Some questions, e.g. Where's your homework? may be unwelcome because they imply a failure on your part to fulfil an obligation or expectation, depending on tone and context.

Yet other questions do not really seem to require an answer: So you're a Buddhist, are you? and, Surely you can't really believe in reincarnation? These questions are basically rhetorical questions where the questioner is trying to make a point, perhaps in an aggressive manner, not to elicit an answer.

The point of asking you to consider your reactions to these questions is to make it clear to you that different kinds of questions are asked and they may produce very different personal responses. Whether or not, and in what way you

respond to questions like these may depend on:

- your knowledge
- your understanding of the subject
- whether or not you feel the question is relevant in the context in which it is posed
- whether you understand the purpose and nature of the question
- whether or not you feel the question is intrusive or threatening
- whether you feel competent to answer the question in terms of knowledge
- whether you feel confident in terms of your oral skills to share your knowledge and views in public
- whether or not you feel that your audience/the reception of your answer will be sympathetic

It may also depend on who is asking you the question, whether you think they or your fellows know more about the subject than you do, and your sense of obligation and values about yourself, your faith stance (if you have one) and your peers.

The purpose of this first part of the exercise has been to help you to think through how you deal with and feel about questions and questioning, particularly in the academic context. Next, we will go on to consider the purpose of questioning in the academic context.

### **Stage 3. The nature and purpose of questions and questioning**

The purpose of this part of the exercise is to help you to think about why questions are asked in the academic context and how you might respond to the invitation to answer or ask questions.

Please jot down brief answers to the following questions.

1. Why do teachers ask questions?

**Possible feedback:** To amuse themselves, to humiliate students by revealing their ignorance, to engage people in discussion and dialogue, to elicit basic information, to check whether people know things, to check people have been listening/ have done a piece of preparation, to find out if people understand things, to help people develop their oral skills in public, to gain a variety of perspectives on an issue or subject, to help people to learn to think 'on their feet', to deepen critical analysis of the subject under consideration, to give students an opportunity to air their doubts or opinions.

2. What do you think might be the advantages and disadvantages for you as a student of attempting to answer questions?

**Possible feedback:** Advantages: Allows you to share your views, to articulate more clearly what you think, to have your views challenged and deepened by other learners, to have experience of speaking in public so building your confidence, to have your understanding, knowledge and vocabulary checked, to build a mutual learning environment with others, to allow others to learn from you. Disadvantages: May expose ignorance, may be 'wrong' answer or a 'silly' point, may not be taken seriously, risks exposure to others, may make you feel 'stupid', may attract criticism and rejection of others for your point of view etc.

3. When do you think it is appropriate to ask questions of others (teachers and fellow learners)?

**Possible feedback:** When you don't understand things, feel that what you have been told is wrong or unclear, need

more information, want to extend a line of enquiry, discussion or thought, want the views, knowledge and opinions of others, want to show an interest, etc.

4. Do you think there are times and circumstances when it is appropriate not to answer questions?

**Possible feedback:** If people ask rhetorical or meaningless questions, if questions seem inappropriately personal, if questions are being used as a means of aggressive interrogation rather than elicitive enquiry, if questions do not have an answer and discussing ways to an answer does not seem productive, if what is needed is more knowledge, not more discussion, etc.

5. What is a 'good' question? i.e., What do you think are the sorts of questions that are most useful?

**Possible feedback:** Depends on purpose and context of question, but generally questions that elicit information and viewpoints are open-ended in contrast to those that require one word, yes or no answers.

6. Is a question ever neutral?

**Possible feedback:** even by raising a question one may be suggesting that the topic is worthy of attention, or that the interaction it engenders is worth having. Some questions presuppose a certain worldview, a premise or type of relationship, which one may either inadvertently or intentionally agree to by answering in the anticipated manner or even by answering at all.

### **Finally**

- remember that probably the most difficult but often most honest and useful answers to any questions are, I do not know, and I do not understand
- you always have a right to remain silent, but if you never speak you may not learn so much, nor contribute much to the education of others.

## **Stage 4: Questioning in religion and religious studies**

The following questions are about the interaction between the academic study of religion and the personal pursuit of a particular faith for religious or spiritual reasons.

### **A. Choosing to study TRS**

- What led you to study TRS at university? (You may have more than one reason.) What had you hoped to get out of the academic study of religions?
- Has the academic study of religions been what you expected so far? If not, explain how it is different and whether these differences are good or bad in your view.
- Did you have questions about religion(s) when you came to university? If so, are the questions that are addressed in your courses in line with those questions, or different from what you expected? In what way? What do you think about this?

### **B. Studying TRS and personal beliefs**

- Would you say you are still formulating your personal beliefs?
  - Do you expect your university studies to augment your personal beliefs? Do you think academic