

Why Study Theology and Religious Studies

Dr Amy M. Russell

Theology and religious studies (TRS) are taught at many universities across the UK. 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. TRS is a gateway to knowledge that will help you understand and engage with history, culture and societies. Through the study of TRS, you become familiar with lots of other academic subjects, including philosophy, history, literature and languages. TRS helps you respect, evaluate and make sense of other people's values and actions.

It is impossible to deny the impact that religion has on the world. A full understanding of any society must include knowledge about religion and beliefs. You could ask why did the former Yugoslavia break into different countries? What is the historical relationship between Pakistan, India and Bangladesh? These questions cannot be answered without reference to religion. To this day religion continues to shape our world, its politics and the way people interact with each other. Equally you may want to question how a benevolent God could allow the Holocaust to happen? Or why there is suffering in the world? These are important theological questions.

If someone asked you what you thought about the situation in Israel and Palestine, or what your opinion was on the recent legislation in France to ban the burqa (the full veil that covers a woman's face and body) in public spaces, could you comment? Would you understand what the key issues were in the debate? These topics have been headline news in the last year and both raise theological and religious issues. By studying for a degree in TRS you will develop the skills and abilities to help you understand why people think and act in certain ways, even if those people live in contexts which are radically different to your own. This means that you will be able to unpick the complex layers of debates and be able to respond in an informed and balanced way to questions about important ethical, political and historical issues like those named above.

1. What is Theology and Religious Studies?

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.¹ Certainly, many universities teach theology (or divinity, as it is referred to in some universities) and religious studies as part of the same degree programme because both are concerned with the exploration of religious beliefs and practices. However, there are important differences between them, and it is for this reason that we will consider them both in their own right. The differences lie in the sorts of questions they seek to

answer and the methods which they use to answer them.

For most students coming to university, Theology is a subject they haven't come across before. However, if you've done any Philosophy of Religion at school you've probably already studied some theology by thinking about important questions about religion, such as; is there a God? If so, what is God like? What implications does the nature of God have for the problems of evil and suffering? However, theology is much more than this, as it examines how individuals should live in the context of their faith.

Historically universities in the United Kingdom only taught religion in the context of Theology. Theology is the study of the divine in a religious tradition. The term theology is not without its critics as it implies a particular kind of understanding of 'God' because 'theos' means God and 'ology' is a suffix that means 'the study of'. This has historically meant that universities have studied the God of Christianity. However, theology is much more than discussions on the nature of God, as you will see in the next section.

Theology and religious studies have two distinct academic histories. Religious studies did not come to prominence as a discipline in its own right until the 20th century; until this point, theology held centre stage, and focused to a very large extent on the Christian tradition. In the 18th and 19th centuries, interest in other religions developed as a result of the increase in travel and colonialism. It wasn't until the early 20th Century that universities really began to engage with and support the study of religions other than Christianity. In 1904 the University of Manchester included religious studies under the title of 'comparative religion' in its degree programmes, but the real turning point came in 1967 when Lancaster University founded the very first dedicated religious studies department.²

Most degrees will have core components that are modules you must take. This means that while some universities will specialise in certain subjects like biblical studies or comparative religions others will allow you to try all of these and more during your degree. In the next sections we will examine the two distinct subjects of Theology and Religious Studies. We will examine what the differences are between these subjects and what topics you might study at university if you take Theology and/or Religious Studies as your degree.

One way to distinguish between Theology and Religious Studies is that Theology asks questions that come from a position of belief. If you ask the question 'How is it possible for Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine?'³ You are asking a key theological question for Christianity but you are assuming that there is a God and that God was made incarnate in Jesus, two key statements of faith. What this means is that although the question assumes the truth of its key statements, to study responses to the question you do not necessarily have to believe in the key statements. You could study how theologians have responded to this question and analyse their responses from inside or outside Christianity but to do theology responses to this question must be made with reference to the religious tradition it concerns.⁴ This question requires not only religious belief but Christian belief specifically. It could not be transferred on to, for example, Islam because the idea of Allah as incarnate is to associate the divine with the physical world and this is 'defined as shirk, a serious sin.'⁵ Thus Christian Theology is a different subject to Islamic what we might describe as 'Islamic Sciences'⁶ and each subject presupposes belief in the faith under analysis.

Religious Studies, on the other hand, does not predicate its analysis on a belief in the key concepts of the religion/s that are studied. It remains neutral to claims of truth. As George Chryssides argues 'there is no more reason to assume that a student of religion is religious than there is to assume that a student of criminology is a criminal!'⁷ What they are trying to say here is that to believe in and practice something (e.g. a particular faith) is not a prerequisite of studying it.

Religious studies asks not only what do people believe but how can we analyse belief? You cannot test for religion in a laboratory and you cannot rank people's faith on a scale because it is so personal to each person, so how do we talk about religion and how can we understand it? If I stand in a church I have never been to before and watch a service can I say that I understand that denomination or the religious practices of that church group? But what if it was a church I regularly attended so I would better understand what was going on, but could I analyse what was going on

or would my judgement be influenced by my faith? This is called the 'insider/outsider question' and it continues to be the focus of intense debate amongst religious studies scholars: can a student of religion learn more about a religious tradition if they are a part of that tradition, or is the knowledge acquired more authentic and more valuable if they are studying it from the position of an outsider?

Both Theology and Religious Studies recognise that both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can offer valuable perspectives in the study of religions.⁸

2. What does it mean to do theology?

Theology means 'discourse about God'; quite simply, when we talk about God, we are 'doing' theology. It is the study of the divine, and of the nature and implications of belief about the divine. Theologians undertake rational, philosophical analyses of religious doctrines and the nature of faith. In higher education in the UK, the teaching of theology is predominantly Christian in focus, with other religious traditions usually studied under the discipline heading of Religious Studies.

However, the scope of Theology is not necessarily restricted to the Christian tradition. Ninian Smart, a famous religious studies scholar, used the term 'Buddhology' to describe a form of Buddhist theology.⁹ Theology is vitally important in all religions because it is the discussion and process of deciding how to respond to issues and challenges that arise in today's society through reference to the divine. For example globalization has created many changes in people's lives around the world. How to respond to these changes and examining their implications for people who have a faith is a key part of theology. It is also a key part of how individuals will respond to these challenges so theology happens at a community level as well as in universities.¹⁰ This means a theology degree can help you understand the issues facing communities around the world.

3. What does a degree in theology involve?

Theology students look at a number of different issues throughout their degrees, and will develop new and exciting ways of thinking which mirror the approaches used in different schools of theology. The following theological methods, and the topics with which they are associated, are likely to be studied as part of a theology degree:

Systematic theology

Systematic theology is the overarching focus of many university theology programmes. It can be defined as the rational and rigorous analysis of the nature and validity of Christian faith, as derived from the Bible and the development of doctrine since the very beginnings of the Christian tradition. Systematic theologians explore and critique Christian doctrines and practices, and asks whether the ways Christianity thinks and talks about God, and the methods it uses to do so, are adequate, or whether they need a little - or a lot! - more consideration. You may be familiar with the names of some well-known systematic theologians: St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Henry Newman, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, to name just a few. Key topics of study in systematic theology are God, Jesus Christ, the incarnation, creation, trinity, and salvation. Some of the questions which systematic theology strives to answer are:

- What is the meaning of God's creation of humanity?
- Why is Jesus' incarnation important for Christians?
- What is the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
- What is atonement, and what does it mean to be saved by God?
- What is the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection?

Not all systematic theologians adopt the same methods for thinking about these questions. Dogmatic theologians think that Christian theology should be done by Christians alone, and that the focus should be on the Church's dogmas (beliefs). Against this, philosophical theologians use philosophical methods to explore how metaphysical truths - about what it means to be human, of what the human experience of life in the world consists of - which come to us from outside of the Church compare with Christian beliefs.

Recently, new ways of 'doing' systematic theology have emerged from within groups which have historically been on the margins of mainstream theology, reflecting their general position in society. These can be called Political Theologies and Theologies of Oppression.

The poor and oppressed of Latin America, women, black people, and gay people are amongst the groups of people who are reconceiving theology in light of their own experiences which, as they have pointed out, are very different from the experiences of the white, middle-class male academics who have dominated the theological landscape up until now.

Two examples of these new ways of thinking are feminist theology and liberation theology. Feminist theology reconceives, reforms and reconstructs theology in the light of women's experience - seeking a revision of thought, language and biblical and liturgical texts. It aims to enrich theology by bringing to it talents, experiences and scholarship of women. Liberation theology developed in Latin America as a form of resistance to the oppression and suffering of the poor. Liberation theology argues that the New Testament portrays Jesus as a revolutionary and that his message was a political one aimed at the attainment of social justice and the eradication of injustice and oppression.

This is a very exciting time for systematic theology, which seeks to remain faithful to classical theology whilst listening attentively to new voices.

Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy of religion and ethics also fall within the field of systematic theology, but we will consider them separately because they are often taught as distinct courses. Philosophy of religion is the name for philosophical reflection on religious doctrines, beliefs and practices. Philosophers of religion apply philosophical methods - such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language - and arguments to religious worldviews. Some important questions for philosophers of religion relate to life's 'big questions':

- Does God exist?
- What is a religion? Does it necessarily involve a belief in a god or gods?
- Does diversity of religions and religious experience mean that there are many gods, or does it suggest that there are none?
- How is religious belief related to knowledge?
- How could (or should) different religious beliefs be reconciled?
- If God exists, how can s/he permit the existence of evil? (you may have heard this issue referred to as 'the problem of evil')
- Do human beings have free will, and if so, what does that mean for God's omnipotence?
- Is there an afterlife? If there is, what is it like?

Studying philosophy of religion also includes looking at ethical issues, which, in the context of a theology degree, means thinking about how the relationship between God and humanity influences the way we approach some important moral questions. Ethics is the study of how human beings ought to behave, and can be summed up in one

phrase: How should I live? More specifically, studying ethics includes thinking about questions like:

- What sort of people should we be?
- Which principles should govern our behaviour?
- What sort of acts ought we to do or not to do?
- What sort of goals ought we to aim for?
- Which sources of authority ought we to consult when we make moral decisions - the Bible? Tradition? Philosophical methods and principles? Science? Human experience?
- How do ethical beliefs differ from one religion, or one culture or society, to the next?

In ethics modules, you may consider topics as wide-ranging as: beginning and end of life issues, including abortion, reproductive ethics, euthanasia and the death penalty; sex; war; justice; religious freedom; animal rights; and the validity of various moral theories.

'Christian ethics' describes ethical thinking which is done from a Protestant perspective; 'moral theology' is the term for ethics which are done from a Catholic standpoint. Looking at ethical issues through the lens of Christianity leads to some distinctive conclusions.

Church history

Also called ecclesiastical history, this field looks at the development of Christianity from the time of Jesus to the modern period. Key periods of interest to church historians include:

- Christianity's beginnings as a Jewish sect in the first century
- The Patristic period (c. 100-451) (patristics is the study of early Christian writers - or 'Church fathers')
- Medieval and renaissance Christianity (c. 1050-1500)
- The reformation and post-reformation period (c. 1500-1750)
- Contemporary Christianity (c. 1750-present)

Important events in the Church's history are studied, for example, the legalisation of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the development of the Biblical canon, the Crusades, the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western Church, the Spanish Inquisition, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Second Vatican Council, the growth of fundamentalism, and the development of ecumenism and inter-faith relations.

Biblical Theology

Biblical Theology is interested in the textual basis of the Christian faith. It explores the Old Testament, early Judaism (the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the Intertestamental period, which is the time between the writing of the Old and New Testaments), and the New Testament.

In Biblical theology, you will think about how Biblical texts should be interpreted. This may involve learning a language, usually Biblical Hebrew or New Testament Greek. You will also engage with the method of interpretation used by Biblical theologians known as exegesis, the close reading and analysis of particular passages from the Bible which attempts to discover their meaning, their origins and the identity and historical context of their author. Biblical theology will also introduce you to modern Biblical criticism.

Contemporary theological questions

Contemporary theological questions of interest include evolution, secularisation, atheism, religion in the modern world, political theology, science and religion, gender and religion, race and religion, social justice, interfaith issues and ecumenism.

Practical theology

Practical theology is also called 'applied theology'. It includes the sub-disciplines of pastoral theology, homiletics, and Christian education. As the name suggests, it is about applying the insights of Christian theology in real life situations. It is therefore a major component of ministerial training.

Practical theology examines the formation and content of preaching and worship as well as reflecting upon the ethical dimensions of the behaviour of Christians.

Summary

Students of theology take an in-depth look at the development of religious thought, the formation of religious doctrines, the construction and significance of sacred texts, the meaning of religious belief, and the practice of religion. They learn to debate and evaluate important issues, to discuss complex problems with sensitivity and respect, to draw on evidence from religion to make their points and to engage others with their views.

4. What does it mean to do Religious Studies?

Religious Studies, also known as 'the study of religion,' examines the global religions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism. However, it also can examine other religious movements like Paganism or Wicca, as well as new religious movements and new expressions of older religions. Religious Studies may also look at atheism (or 'non-belief') and the increasing visibility of new forms of atheism.

Studying Religions

Religious Studies does not simply explain what religious people believe and do but it asks more pertinent questions such as; what is religion? What is the difference between religion and spirituality?

Equally, religious studies teaches you to realise that often we see and interpret religious practices and phenomena in a specific way. If a Christian visits a mosque how would they make sense of it? Would they look for an equivalent to an altar, or a vicar or priest? Would it be valid to try to understand Islam in that way or is that simply imposing Christian concepts on to another religion? Questioning these assumptions and the way you view the world helps you think more creatively and with greater awareness of other people's perceptions and your own assumptions.

By enabling you to study how people experience and live their religious beliefs, a degree in religious studies allows you to question fixed assumptions of what religion is. In Japan people are often blessed as children through a Shinto ceremony, yet may go on to have secular weddings and Buddhist funerals. Does that mean those people are Shinto or Buddhist, both or neither? A degree in religious studies will help you unpick these questions so you can understand how religion is actually lived. Religion is very often simplified and stereotyped, especially in the media, but it is much more complex in the lives of individuals. Religious studies prepares students to respond to people as individuals rather than stereotypes of a particular group.

Comparative Religion

Some religious studies courses are called 'comparative religion' courses although the term has fallen out of favour recently. This is because it can be very difficult to compare religions because they are all so very different that even the methods you might use to study one religion would not be appropriate for the study of another. It is important to

note that not all religions are monotheistic or have one key sacred text like the Bible or the Qur'an. Historically when scholars tried to understand religions other than Christianity they often approached their study by using the same methods they had used to understand Christianity;¹¹ looking for a key book, looking at organised public worship, examining the history of how the religion developed, looking for ceremonies and rituals like baptisms and weddings, and questioning what was the highest deity equivalent to the Christian God. It was recognised later on that these questions aren't suitable for many of the world's religions. For example, Hinduism has no one book of teachings, Buddhism does not have a 'God' and in Theravada Buddhism there is no equivalent to a wedding ceremony. Religious Studies then helps us make sense of these religions while showing that simply applying a Christian approach to other religions is not appropriate. This gives students skills to evaluate information about religion and critically analyse not only what is being said about that religion, but what it tells us about the author and their perspective.

5. What does a degree in religious studies involve?

The point has already been made that religion has a huge impact on every aspect of life. This means that there is a huge variety in what you can learn as a student of religions. Some universities teach modules on particular religions, for example Buddhism, and each week they look at a different aspect of it. Other universities may choose a topic like 'women' and look at a different religion each week to examine the place of women in that religion. Other courses may focus on key issues in different religions, such as interfaith dialogue, death and dying or the sacred. Sometimes, you can choose to specialise in one religion or learn about lots of different religions. These different approaches to teaching religious studies mean that as a student you have a choice in the subjects you will learn and you can choose a degree which you think will interest you the most over the next three years.

No two religious studies degree courses are the same. Generally, though, a religious studies degree will expose you to a range of different disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy and languages, which means that, when you graduate, you will do so with a general knowledge of many subjects and an impressive set of transferable skills. The following sections will look at how some of these subjects are taught with religion as part of a Religious Studies degree. Although each of these subjects have degrees in their own right you can see that a religious studies degree can encompass all of these subjects by using their methods and theories and applying them to the analysis of religion.

Anthropology and Religion

Anthropology is the study of human beings, their behaviour, culture, rituals and the way they act and respond to change as groups and communities. Anthropologists originally studied isolated groups and tribes to explore the way their societies worked by doing fieldwork. Anthropology brings many things to the study of religion. Understanding the importance of rituals and rites of passage can help us understand what ritual tells us about beliefs beyond this world. Equally anthropology has produced a great deal of writing on fieldwork ethics and as researchers of religion students can learn from anthropology about fieldwork.

Some degree courses allow you to do fieldwork, where you can visit places of worship in the UK or in the rest of the world and see how religion is practiced on a day to day basis. While your experience of studying different religions at school may be limited to being given information on 'what Hindus believe' or 'what Buddhists do', a degree in religious studies will show you that no two people practice their religion in the same way. This then leads to a discussion of culture, history, tradition and religion and encourages you to think about whether it is possible to tell where one begins and the other ends.

Sociology of Religion

Sociology of religion can take multiple forms. In the classical sense it is the analysis of why people believe in a religion and participate in it, and what this means for society. For some writers religion is the core of society and there would

be no social cohesion without it, for others religion is only part of a society and for others it has a function or role in that society without it necessarily having to be true or have any supernatural reality. These debates have a long history and students can examine what each one means for society. If religion creates social cohesion what would that mean for an increasingly secularised society? If religion only has a function and no supernatural reality can other things that bring people together count as religion - for example what is the difference between religion and the supporters of a football club who meet once a week and sing together and hope (and pray?) for success?

History of Religion

The history of religions allows us not only to understand what has gone before but what has shaped the current landscape of religion. It allows us to know how the different denominations of Christianity were created or what happened to create the distinct groups of Sunni and Shia Muslims. Understanding the history of a religion can help make sense of the power and influence certain religions hold in particular countries. For example, understanding the history of Catholicism in France helps to understand the French concept of secular citizenship and how citizenship is used as a justification for the ban on the burqa in public spaces.

Religion in contemporary society.

Many have argued that in the UK we live in a secular society, yet in the UK Census of 2001 over 70% of people identified themselves as belonging to a religion. Religion still plays a huge part in our contemporary society, and most people will have a view on religion; whether being opposed to it, indifferent to it, or embracing it as central to their lives. Religion, and attitudes towards religion, can be found in all parts of contemporary society and culture. As a result the study of religion in contemporary society can take many forms, including:

- Ethical issues
- Religion in the media, including the Internet
- Religion and politics, both domestic and international
- Religion and development
- Religion and communities, including relations between communities
- Religion in literature, both historical and contemporary; and including sacred and non-sacred texts
- The growth and proliferation of new forms of religion

If we take one example from this list, religion and the Internet, we can see how this contemporary issue has had a profound effect on how religion is represented and practiced. For example, the Internet has had an impact on how Islam is practiced, represented and interpreted between and within Muslim societies. Significant new forms of online authority have evolved, drawing on traditional practices and - in some cases - integrating new understandings and models of knowledge and authority. The study of religion, as filtered through online Muslim religious expression, provides tools for enhancing contemporary understandings of the dynamics within modern Muslim societies, within minority and majority contexts. Some of these methodological tools can also be applied in studying internet activities relating to other religions.¹²

6. Will I lose my faith if I study theology and/or religious studies?

This is a concern that is often raised at open days at universities. Many people will tell you an answer based upon their own experience but no one can really answer this question for you. Will you learn more about your own religion (if you have one)? Yes. If you take modules in, for example Christianity, you could look at church history, the life of Jesus, the role of missionaries in Africa or the construction of the New Testament. Will you like everything you learn? Probably not. This is true of all religions. You will no doubt learn about heroic and inspiring acts done as a result of

people's faith but you will, inevitably, also learn about the awful suffering that has been caused in the world in the name of religion. This knowledge of religion reveals its complexity, a complexity you will learn to engage with and understand. You may also find that you have an opportunity to discuss issues and questions that have always troubled you and you may find that those answers strengthen your faith.

You may also study inter-faith dialogue and how people of different faiths can communicate their beliefs and ideas to each other. This may help you understand what is essential to your beliefs and how to convey this to others. Communication skills are a large part of working in a team and a degree in TRS allows you to learn how to discuss even the most sensitive of topics and how to work well with others who may not share the same beliefs as you.

Whatever the subject, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is usually transformative at some level, changing a person's perspectives and often their attitudes. The nature of TRS means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook. The experience of studying this subject may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs and values adopted for one's own life, and not least, the challenging of prejudices. The multidisciplinary nature of much TRS also means that students have breadth of vision and intellectual flexibility.

University is a time where you grow and develop as a person whether you are studying your own religion or not. Within any university there are support networks for their students whenever they need it.

7. What makes theology and religious studies graduates employable?

Graduates of theology and religious studies leave university and enter into a wide variety of jobs which are not necessarily clearly related to what they studied. When you take a theology and/or religious studies degree people often ask you if you plan to teach or become a religious leader! Many people do go on to become religious education teachers and a few do decide to join religious organisations. A degree in TRS is often the ideal qualification for doing these things. After a TRS degree, teaching or employment as part of a religion can be a great way to use the information you have gained. However it is also a way to use the organisation and communication skills you have learnt during your degree, which will be transferable to a range of sectors.

Many other graduates will choose to use the skills they have gained in their degrees in a variety of settings, beyond religious institutions and educational contexts. In our increasingly globalised world and our multicultural society it is recognised that the workplace, whatever form it may take, is likely to represent the international community in which we live. This gives TRS graduates a great advantage when applying for jobs. Employers recognise how valuable it is to have employees who have knowledge of cultural and religious diversity. Individuals who understand other faiths, beliefs, philosophies and cultures and can share this knowledge with others will be highly valued. Those who have studied TRS "demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a variety of contemporary worldviews and ... have demonstrated skills of discernment and evaluation of religious and philosophical issues and arguments, qualities much needed in today's world."¹³ As well as subject-specific knowledge and skills, you will also gain skills that can be transferred into a variety of contexts. See our web pages for more information on the skills you can expect to learn and the sorts of careers that graduates of TRS go into:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/employability/profiles/rs/skills.html>

Summary

Often a university will not require you to have studied religion or theology before you start your degree. You might have taken courses in Religious Studies or Religious Education in the past. While this is useful, the way TRS is studied at university is very different to how it is studied in schools and sixth form colleges, as this article has explained. Theology and Religious Studies are not the same subject, but they have much in common because each

recognises the value and importance of religion and belief in our world. Studying these subjects can produce students who are better prepared than their peers to be global citizens, allowing them to understand those things that are fundamentally important in the lives of a variety of people. TRS will also help you gain critical skills that are transferable to contexts far beyond religion. TRS encompasses a range of different subjects that will teach you to have empathy and sensitivity to other beliefs and cultures while also equipping you with the analytical ability to critically respond to complex issues. It will furnish you with skills that make you more employable whilst allowing you to spend your time studying a fascinating subject which encourages you to engage in depth with some of life's most profound and interesting questions.

For more information on careers and employability after a TRS degree:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/employability/profiles/rs/skills.html>

Endnotes

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