

## From A-level to Higher Education: Student Perceptions of Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religious Studies

Author: Mike Fearn and Leslie J. Francis

---

Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN:

ISSN-L:

Volume: 3

Number: 2

Start page: 58

End page: 91

---

[Return to vol. 3 no. 2 index page](#)

---

### Introduction

At a time when full-time undergraduate programmes in theology and religious studies are finding it difficult to recruit students, as evidenced by the recent closure of several such programmes, it is wise to examine the traditional pathways of entry into such courses. The immediate progression from A-level study to undergraduate courses remains sufficiently core to the business of higher education providers of undergraduate programmes in theology and religious studies to merit closer scrutiny.

The thesis of this paper is that the perceptions and expectations of conventional entrants to undergraduate courses in theology and religious studies are shaped by their experiences of religious education in the secondary school and in the further education sector, especially at examination level through GCSE and A-level programmes. The aims of the present paper, therefore, are threefold: to provide a brief overview of the changing context in which religious

education is taught throughout the state maintained sector of schools; to examine the existing research-based literature on the motivation of students to study religion at A-level and beyond; and to report new findings concerning the perceptions and expectations of studying theology and religious studies at undergraduate level held by those current A-level religious studies students who intend to pursue the subject in higher education.

## Religious education in schools

Mainly as a consequence of the pioneering initiatives of the churches to build schools in England and Wales during the nineteenth century through voluntary bodies like the National Society and the British and Foreign School Society (see Francis, 1987), religious education was largely taken for granted as an essential component of the school curriculum. The 1870 Elementary Education Act assured that in practical terms religious education in Board Schools was non-denominational in character (see Rich, 1970). However, it has been argued that the key politicians who shaped the legislation, Forster and Cowper-Temple, were of the opinion that the Act should not have prevented denominational religious education (see Murphy, 1972). For the first time the 1944 Education Act created the statutory requirement that religious education should be taught in all state maintained schools (see Dent, 1947). The non-denominational 'religious instruction' within county schools was to be determined by locally agreed syllabuses, while voluntary aided schools were required to provide denominational religious instruction in accordance with their historic trust deed. Voluntary controlled schools could also provide denominational religious instruction for the children of those parents who requested it. Clearly in 1944 religious education was conceived as a faith-based subject.

The 1988 Education Reform Act continued in many ways to confuse the matters of religious education and the matters of religious faith. According to the 1988 Education Reform Act, religious education remained outside the national curriculum and subject to locally agreed syllabuses (see Cox and Cairns, 1989). The churches continued to play a central role in the Agreed Syllabus Conferences which developed and authorised the local syllabuses and in the Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education which were given responsibility for maintaining the delivery of religious education at the local level. The view that religious education was still to do with religious faith was also maintained by the conscience clause which permitted parents to withdraw pupils from religious education lessons.

In spite of the apparent assumptions of the legislative context, enormous changes had taken place in educational theory underpinning religious education between the 1944 Education Act and the 1988 Education Reform Act. Key to such changes was the pioneering work of Ninian Smart in the higher education sector and through the Schools Council Working Party which he chaired. Schools Council Working Paper 36, **Religious Education in Secondary Schools**, changed the emphasis of religious education in secondary education from a matter of developing faith to a matter of studying religious traditions (see Schools Council, 1971). This paper was largely written by Smart.

## Student motivation

Although there have been considerable changes in the philosophy underpinning the provision of religious education in schools, there has been remarkable stability in pupil attitudes toward the subject. Reviews of research concerning pupil attitudes toward religious education from the early years of the twentieth century to the present day have concluded that religious education remains one of the least popular subjects in secondary school (Francis and Lewis, 1996). However, in spite of the general lack of popularity of the subject, a significant and growing minority of pupils are now taking a real interest in religious education at GCSE level and at A-level.

In a pioneering pilot study, Francis, Fearn, Astley and Wilcox (1999) set out to examine the motivation of A-level religious studies students to study religion at A-level and to progress to studying religion at degree level. Three main conclusions have so far emerged from this pilot study and from subsequent work building on it (see Fearn, 2002). First, the data demonstrate that at A-level twice as many students were motivated to study religion by a 'religious studies' approach to the subject. However, while the major interest at A-level is focused on religious studies, the major interest at university level study is more likely to be a faith based approach. Second, the data demonstrate that motivation to study religion remains linked to the students' own religious faith. Practising churchgoers are likely to hold

a different view from non-churchgoers regarding the nature and content of religious studies programmes in which they express interest. Third, the data demonstrate that studying religion both at A-level and at undergraduate level is a highly feminised activity. Many more females than males express an interest in the subject. At the same time, males who express interest in studying religion may emphasise somewhat different aspects of the subject matter in comparison with females who express interest in studying religion.

## **Mapping the subject**

A-level religious studies students who wish to make the progression from school to studying religion in higher education may find themselves confronted with a mesmerising range of choices. On the face of the matter, the choice between 'religious studies' and 'theology' programmes may appear quite straightforward, but once the university prospectus arrives the whole issue may seem so much more complex. Departments which run both theology and religious studies options generally have modules common to both. In some cases the name of the module (and even the brief description) may provide little insight into the perspective taken by the programme of study. In some cases the terminology used in the module title may be unfamiliar to the potential candidate.

A survey of publicity material from university departments of theology reveals the absence of any coherence or core element within the discipline. One might imagine the situation where graduates in theology and religious studies from different universities in the UK (or perhaps more interestingly, from the same university) have no common experience of being instructed in any single aspect of method or content which is deemed to be a vital component in an undergraduate programme in theology.

Courses in this fragmented discipline may include the academic quest for 'God in cinema' 'religion in rock music', and the like. The discipline may also include the study of classical biblical languages, the study of patristics, political revolutionary theologies of the oppressed, or the study of Christology. The absence of core subject matter may be seen to be mirrored by an absence of universally agreed methodology. Linguists, historians, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists may all find themselves teaching in university departments of theology.

Against this background, the present study has assembled a large number of module titles collected from publicity material from university departments of theology and religious studies. A sample of religious studies A-level students who intend to study religion at undergraduate level were asked to rate their level of interest in these modules. Their responses should enable us to assess the relative likely popularity of different provisions within the academy. Further analyses will then examine the extent to which males and females express different preferences and the extent to which churchgoers and non-churchgoers express different preferences. Such analyses should enable us to assess the value of targeting specific programmes of study to different groups of students.

## **2. Method**

### **Measures**

The detailed questionnaires included the following measures in addition to age and sex: measures of interest in theology and religious studies, measures of frequency of church attendance, and future educational aspirations.

### **Interest in theology and religious studies.**

Departments of theology, religious studies, and related subject fields and disciplines were identified from the AUDTRS Handbook. Having identified these departments, a systematic review of their publicity material was undertaken. Thirteen discrete areas emerged as being the core foci within departments in the higher education sector in England and Wales. Across these thirteen key areas, there are literally hundreds of different courses on offer. Some are very similar, with only very slight differences in their names. In order to operationalise this research the list of modules was

rationalised in order that the participants could indicate the level of interest that they may have in different courses, rated on a 5 point scale reflecting a range between low levels of interest (1) and high levels of interest (5).

### **Church attendance.**

Frequency of church attendance was assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 'never', through 'once or twice a year', 'sometimes', 'at least once a month', to 'at least once a week'.

### **Future educational aspirations.**

Participants were asked whether or not they intended to pursue a degree in the areas of either theology or religious studies. Respondents were asked to respond with either 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know'.

## **Sample**

A-level religious studies students following syllabi of three examination associations in England and Wales participated in the study. Completed questionnaires were returned by 1,103 students, representing a response rate of 60%.

According to future educational intention, 17% of students were firmly committed to progressing to do a degree in the broad areas of theology or religious studies. A further 19% were not yet fully committed, but remained open to undertaking undergraduate study in this area. This left nearly two thirds (64%) of A-level religious studies students who were clearly not interested in pursuing theology and religious studies at undergraduate level.

The following analyses are based only on the 181 students who were clear about their intention to study theology or religious studies in higher education. Of the 181 students, 34 were male and 147 were female. Sixty-seven were regular churchgoers who attended services at least once a month (37%), 28 attended several times a year (16%), while 85 attended less frequently than three times per year (47%), and one of the respondents provided no information relating to frequency of attendance at a place of worship.

## **Analysis**

Initially a frequency count shows overall levels of interest among the group of participants showing the proportion who rated each area 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale. This analysis is followed by a series of chi-square analyses exploring the differences in responses between males and females, and between those who attend church at least once a month and those who attend church less than three times per year.

## **3. Results**

### **Six world faiths**

The first section of the survey examined the levels of interest shown in studying the six main world faiths generally considered to be represented in England and Wales: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism. The data presented in table 1.1 demonstrate that these six faiths can be conceived within three groupings.

Two-thirds of students (68%) expressed an interest in Christianity. Between two-fifths and half of the students expressed an interest in Buddhism (47%), Judaism (45%), and Islam (41%). Between a quarter and a third of students expressed an interest in Hinduism (33%) and Sikhism (24%).

The sex differences displayed in table 1.2 demonstrate that females held a significantly higher level of interest than males in Hinduism, Judaism, and Sikhism. Overall women were more interested than men in the study of world religions.

The religious differences displayed in table 1.3 demonstrate that churchgoers held a significantly higher level of interest in Christianity and a significantly lower level of interest in Buddhism, compared with non-churchgoers. However, church attendance was not significantly related to the level of interest shown in Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism.

## **Ways of studying religion**

The second section of the survey examined the overall perceived attraction of the different methodological perspectives for the study of religion presented in British universities. These perspectives employ the tools of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. The section also assessed the perceived attraction of those programmes of study which set out to provide an overview of methodological perspectives. The data presented in table 2.1 make it clear that courses branded as single methods of study were considerably more attractive than courses that attempt to provide an overview of a range of perspectives.

The two ways of studying religion which appealed most highly to students are Philosophy of religion (82%) and Psychology of religion (80%). The Sociology of religion was slightly less attractive (72%), and the Anthropology of religion was considerably less attractive (55%). Courses described as Perspectives on the study of religion were least attractive (47%).

Tables 2.2 and 2.3 demonstrate that there were neither significant sex differences nor significant religious differences in preference for ways of studying religion.

## **Religion in the modern world**

The third section in the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in studying aspects of religion in the modern world, including New religious movements, Religious cults, the New age movement, and Interfaith dialogue. The data presented in table 3.1 demonstrate that two out of every three students (67%) expressed an interest in courses which set out to examine the broad theme of Religion in the modern world. Interest remained close to this level for courses concerned with Religious cults (66%) and with New religious movements (60%). There was less interest, however, in courses concerned with the New age movement (48%) and much less interest in courses concerning Interfaith dialogue.

Table 3.2 demonstrates that there were no significant sex differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with religion in the modern world.

Table 3.3 demonstrates that there were no religious differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with New religious movements, Religious cults, or the New age movement. Churchgoers, however, showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in courses described as Religion in the modern world and Interfaith dialogue.

## **Religion and contemporary issues**

A number of departments in higher education offer courses linking religion with a specific issue of salience within the contemporary world. The fourth section of the survey identified four such issues concerned with gender, media, politics, and with the environment. The data presented in table 4.1 demonstrate that the level of interest experienced in such courses varied considerably from one issue to another. Over two-thirds of students expressed interest in Religion and gender issues (71%). Three fifths expressed interest in Religion and the media (62%) and just over a half in Religion and politics (55%). Interest fell to 40% in regard to Religion and the environment.

Table 4.2 demonstrates that there were no significant sex differences in respect of levels of interest in courses concerned with relationship between religion and gender issues, politics, and the environment. However, females

recorded a significantly higher level of interest in courses concerned with religion and the media.

Table 4.3 demonstrates that there were no significant religious differences in preferences for courses concerned with religion and contemporary issues.

## Religious traditions

The fifth section of the survey examined responses to those courses offered within higher education concerned with specific religious traditions. Five specific named courses were included in the survey: African tribal religions, Ancient Egyptian religion, Ancient Roman religion, Ancient Greek religion, and Chinese religions.

The data presented in table 5.1 demonstrate that fewer than half of the students expressed interest in any of these courses. The level of interest ranges from 46% for Ancient Egyptian religion, through 45% for African tribal religions, 44% for Ancient Roman religion, 43% for Ancient Greek religion, to 39% for Chinese religions.

According to table 5.2, there were no significant differences in the levels of interest expressed by males and females in Ancient Egyptian religion, Ancient Roman religion, Ancient Greek religion, and Chinese religion. However, females were significantly more likely than males to express an interest in African tribal religions.

Table 5.3 demonstrates that there were no significant religious differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with religious traditions.

## Languages in the study of religion

Languages play an important part in gaining access to original religious texts, and as a consequence departments in the higher education sector offer courses in a number of key languages relevant to different religious traditions. The sixth section of the survey identified seven such languages offered by various departments: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, Pali, and Aramaic. The data presented in table 6.1 demonstrate that these languages appealed only to a minority of students.

Just over a third of students expressed an interest in Greek (36%), just under a third expressed an interest in Hebrew (30%). The proportions then fell to 24% who express interest in Latin, 18% in Arabic, 17% in Sanskrit, 16% in Aramaic, and just 9% in Pali.

The sex differences displayed in table 6.2 demonstrate that females displayed a higher level of interest than males in the classical languages associated with biblical study and Christian theology, namely Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic. There were, however, no significant sex differences in levels of interest shown in Sanskrit, Pali, or Arabic.

The religious differences displayed in table 6.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in studying Hebrew. There were, however, no significant religious differences associated with levels of interest shown in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Sanskrit, Pali, or Arabic.

## Old Testament studies

The Old Testament is offered in higher education both as the study of broad themes and as the study of specific books or forms of literature. The seventh section of the survey examined the level of interest shown in courses broadly described as Old Testament, and as Literature and theology of the Old Testament, and in more narrowly focused courses described as the Pentateuch, as the Prophetic literature, and as the Psalms.

The data presented in table 7.1 demonstrate that two in every five students expressed an interest in the broadly based courses: 41% in the Old Testament, and 39% in the Literature and theology of the Old Testament. The proportions dropped to 32% who showed an interest in the Prophetic literature, to 30% who showed an interest in the

Psalms, and to 18% who showed an interest in the Pentateuch.

The sex differences displayed in table 7.2 demonstrate that there were no significant sex differences in levels of interest shown in the broadly based courses on the Old Testament, on Literature and theology of the Old Testament, or in the more narrowly focussed courses on the Psalms and the Prophetic literature. On the other hand, females displayed a significantly higher level of interest than males in courses on the Pentateuch.

The religious differences displayed in table 7.3 demonstrate that there were no significant differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in levels of interest expressed in the broadly based courses on the Old Testament and the Literature and theology of the Old Testament, or in the more narrowly focused courses on the Pentateuch or the Prophetic literature. On the other hand, churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in courses on the Psalms.

## **New Testament studies**

Like the Old Testament, The New Testament is offered in higher education as the study of broad themes and as the study of specific books or forms of literature. The eighth section of the survey examined the level of interest shown in courses described broadly as New Testament, and more narrowly focused courses, namely: New Testament Greek, New Testament Epistles, New Testament exegesis, Gospels and Acts, Hebrews and the General Epistles, Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels, Paul: life and thought, New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans.

The data presented in table 8.1 demonstrate that fewer than half of the students were attracted by courses described as New Testament (45%). Within the more tightly focused courses, the greatest level of interest was shown in the Gospels: 47% expressed an interest in a course styled Gospels and Acts and 39% expressed interest in a course styled Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels. New Testament Epistles attracted 32% of the students, followed by Paul: life and thought (30%), New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans (29%), Hebrews and the General Epistles (20%), and New Testament exegesis (20%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 8.2 show no significant differences between levels of interest expressed by males and by females in this area.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 8.3, however, demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in all the areas of New Testament study specified in the survey.

## **Early Church**

The study of the Early Church played an important part in traditional courses of theology. The ninth section of the survey examined student interest in six courses currently offered within this broad area: Theology and history of the Early Church, Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Christian texts, Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church, Patristics, and St Augustine and his age.

The data presented in table 9.1 demonstrate that the topic within this broad field of greatest attraction to students concerned the Dead Sea Scrolls (46%). Early Christian texts were seen as of interest to 37% of the students, Theology and history of the Early Church was seen as of interest to 29% of the students. St Augustine and his age was considered to be of interest to 28% of the students. Courses described as concerned with Patristics were of interest to only 12% of the students.

The data on sex differences displayed in table 9.2 record no significant differences between the levels of interest expressed by males and by females in this area.

The data on religious differences presented in table 9.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in studying courses concerned with Early Christian texts, with Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church, and with Patristics. There were no significant differences, however, between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in levels of interest expressed in Theology and history of the Early Church, Dead Sea Scrolls, or St Augustine and his age.

## **Church history**

Courses in Church history cover a wide range of specialist topics. The tenth section of the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in six different specific courses, namely Theology and history of the Reformation, the English Reformation, Martin Luther and the German Reformation, Seventeenth century Puritanism, Christianity from Kant to Harnack, and Newman and his age. The data presented in table 10.1 demonstrate that fewer than two in every five students expressed interest in any of these courses. The highest level of interest was shown in Christianity from Kant to Harnack (38%). Interest in Martin Luther and the German Reformation was expressed by 35% of the students, but interest in the English Reformation fell to 24%, and interest in Theology and history of the Reformation was at 22%. Other areas of Church history emerged as minority interests, with only 15% of students expressing an interest in Seventeenth century Puritanism, and 14% in Newman and his age.

The data on sex differences displayed in table 10.2 record no significant differences in the levels of interest expressed by males and females in this area.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 10.3 demonstrate that churchgoers displayed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in terms of these specified courses: English Reformation, and Newman and his age. There were, however, no significant differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in respect of the other four specified courses.

## **Theological perspectives**

A highly diverse range of courses is provided by departments in higher education concerning different theological perspectives. The eleventh area of the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in eight specific courses advertised under the following names: Biblical theology, Making of Christian theology, Apologetics, Incarnational theology, Systematic theology, Christian social ethics, Foundations of Christian ethics, and Christian worship. The data presented in table 11.1 demonstrate that there was substantial diversity in the levels of interest shown in both the general theological courses and in the more narrowly focused courses. As many as three fifths of the students were interested in Christian social ethics (61%) and in Biblical theology (60%). A half of the students were interested in pursuing courses in Foundations of Christian ethics (51%) and in Christian worship (50%). Between a third and two fifths of the students expressed an interest in studying Making of Christian theology (38%) and Incarnational theology (36%). Only a quarter of the students expressed an interest in courses concerned with Systematic theology (25%), and only one in five was willing to express an interest in studying Apologetics (19%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 11.2 show that females displayed a higher level of interest than males in courses concerning Christian ethics. They showed significantly higher levels of interest than males in Christian social ethics, and in Foundations of Christian ethics. Furthermore, the data display no significant differences in the levels of interest expressed by males and females in any other area in this cluster.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 11.3 show that churchgoers held significantly more interest than non-churchgoers in five of the eight courses in theological perspectives. Whereas churchgoers displayed significantly more interest than non-churchgoers in Biblical theology, Making of Christian theology, Apologetics, Christian social ethics, and Christian worship, there was no difference between the two groups in the level of interest shown in Incarnational theology, Systematic theology, or Foundations of Christian ethics.

## Contemporary theologies

Theology is a dynamic and evolving subject which has given rise to a range of contemporary theologies. The twelfth section of the survey focused on ten courses that map onto this area, three of which represent broadly based approaches, namely: Modern theology, Contemporary theology, and Theology, modernity, and post-modernity. Seven of the courses are more narrowly focused: Environmental theology, Feminist theology, Liberation theology, Theological hermeneutics, Christianity in the North Atlantic world, Eastern Asian theology, and Latin American theology. Data presented in table 12.1 show that the two broad courses concerning Modern theology and Contemporary theology were interesting to well over half of the students (54% and 57% respectively), whereas the broadly based course Theology, modernity, and postmodernity was considered interesting to only a third of the students (33%). Of the more narrowly focused courses, Feminist theology generated the highest levels of interest with half of the students (49%) claiming an interest in that subject. Over a quarter of the students expressed an interest in Liberation theology (28%) and in Christianity in the North Atlantic world (28%), and just under a quarter indicated an interest in Eastern Asian theology (22%). Fewer than one in every five students indicated an interest in Latin American theology (18%), Environmental theology (17%), and Theological hermeneutics (16%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 12.2 show that females were significantly more interested in studying feminist theology than males. No other items in this cluster generated significantly different levels of interest between males and females.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 12.3 show that only three items were perceived in significantly different ways by churchgoers and by non-churchgoers. Churchgoers showed significantly higher levels of interest than non-churchgoers in Modern theology, Theological hermeneutics, and in Christianity in the North Atlantic world.

## Doctrine

Christian doctrine is either implicitly or explicitly located at the heart of Christian theology. The thirteenth section of the survey examined levels of interest generated by courses which relate to doctrine. The data presented in table 13.1 demonstrate that this group of courses generated a relatively high level of interest among the students. Courses with titles that directly involve God or Jesus were deemed to be the most interesting. Two thirds of the students (67%) expressed an interest in God and the world, three in every five students expressed an interest in Christ in the Christian tradition (59%), and a half were interested in courses concerning Jesus and Christology (51%). It is interesting to note that, on the other hand, courses concerning Christology were considered interesting to only two students in every five (41%). Between a third and a half of the students expressed an interest in the Doctrine of Creation (48%), Eschatology (41%), Doctrine of the Trinity (40%), Trinity and the Church (38%), and the Doctrine of Salvation (35%). Ecclesiology appealed to only one student in every five (20%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 13.2 demonstrate that females showed a higher level of interest than males in studying Jesus and Christology. No other significant sex differences emerged with regard to courses concerning aspects of doctrine.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 13.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in seven of the ten courses. Only Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and God and the world did not generate significantly different levels of interest among churchgoers and among non-churchgoers.

## 4. Conclusions

This study has examined the perceptions of A-level religious studies students of studying theology and religious studies in higher education. Four main conclusions emerge from the data.

First, the data demonstrated that A-level religious studies students represent an important recruitment ground for

departments of theology and religious studies in the higher education sector. In the present sample as many as 17% of the students have expressed an intention to study theology or religious studies at degree level. Perhaps equally important, a further 19% remained open to the idea that they may pursue such a course at degree level. Three practical implications emerge from this conclusion. First, it remains important for departments of theology and religious studies in the higher education sector to keep an eye on changes in religious education and religious studies in the secondary and further education sectors, since changes in these sectors may impact on the skills and expectations of traditional entrants to departments of theology and religious studies. Second, it is important for higher education departments to listen to A-level religious studies students and to understand their perceptions. The students' perceptions of the market may well help to determine which departments of theology and religious studies survive and which do not. Third, it is important for departments in the higher education sector to try to influence A-level religious studies students to pursue courses in the subject area at degree level. Direct marketing to such students through schools may be cost effective.

Second, the data demonstrated that, for one reason or another, many courses currently available in higher education appear unattractive to A-level students. This is bad news for minority interest courses. For example, all of the following courses appealed to less than one in four of those students who have indicated an intention to pursue a degree level course in theology or religious studies: Sikhism (24%), Latin (24%), The English Reformation (24%), Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church (24%), Theology and history of the Reformation (22%), Eastern Asian theology (22%), New Testament exegesis (20%), Ecclesiology (20%), Hebrews and the General Epistles (20%), Apologetics (19%), New Testament Greek (19%), Pentateuch (18%), Latin American theology (18%), Arabic (18%), Sanskrit (17%), Environmental theology (17%), Aramaic (16%), Theological hermeneutics (16%), Seventeenth century Puritanism (15%), Newman and his age (14%), Patristics (12%), Hermeneutics (12%), and Pali (9%).

There are three practical implications which may be drawn from this conclusion. First, some minority interest subjects which experience difficulty in recruiting sufficient students may be forced to close, with potentially damaging effects to staff research, and to recruitment of doctoral students in such areas. Second, it may be that rationalisation of academic resources across the sector can ameliorate some of these problems. If skills in minority subjects are centralised, they may be enabled to flourish. Third, it may be possible to improve recruitment in some of these minority interest areas by marketing them more attractively. It may be that course descriptors written by experts alienate applicants who do not have sufficient background in key specialist areas to be interested by marketing material.

Third, the data demonstrated that there are clear sex differences in perceptions held by males and by females. Recruitment of males is difficult, yet there are some areas which appear interesting to at least a half of the male students: Philosophy of religion (82%), Psychology of religion (77%), God in the world (68%), Sociology of religion (62%), Christianity (61%), Religion and gender issues (59%), Religion in the modern world (56%), Religious cults (56%), Dead Sea Scrolls (53%), Christ in the Christian tradition (50%), Biblical theology (50%), Religion and politics (50%).

Departments which major in such areas may be able to target accordingly, more specifically to males. There are practical implications which may be drawn from this conclusion. First, departments may find it helpful to profile past male students who are working in interesting posts, as examples of the ways in which males enter successful careers through courses at degree level in theology or religious studies. Second, departments should ensure that males and females are both well represented in departmental publicity material, so as to counter the view that theology and religious studies are highly feminised areas of study.

Fourth, the data demonstrated that there are clear differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. The following subjects, for example, appeal to at least two thirds of churchgoers, but under two thirds of non-churchgoers: Christianity, New religious movements, Religion in the modern world, Biblical theology, Christ in the Christian tradition, Christian social ethics, Christian worship, God and the world, Gospels and Acts, and Modern theology. Departments which major in these areas may wish to recognise that student motivation to study may be faith-related. There are two

practical implications which may be drawn from this conclusion. First, marketing such courses through churches may be an appropriate means of attracting relevant courses to the attention of churchgoing students. Second, departments may wish to ensure that applicants from church-related backgrounds are aware that they are going to be academically trained in a manner which is nurturing, supporting, and positive to their faith. In some contexts links with local churches may be developed to attract and to support students.

The present analysis has been based on a survey of 1,103 A-level religious studies students. The findings have been analysed and interpreted to help departments of theology and religious studies in the university sector to develop and market their programmes of study more effectively. However, both students' interests and emphases in A-level religious studies programmes continue to change and to develop. The higher education sector may be well advised to invest in further research capable of monitoring such changes and developments in order to ensure that the higher education sector in theology and religious studies is able to respond in appropriate and timely ways.

## Bibliography

- Cox, E. and Cairns, J.M., ***Reforming Religious Education: the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act*** (London: Kogan Page, 1989).
- Dent, H.J., ***The Education Act 1944: provisions, possibilities and some problems*** (3rd ed.), (London: University of London Press, 1947).
- Fearn, M., ?A socio-psychological profile of subject perceptions of A-level religious studies students? Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wales, Bangor, 2002.
- Francis, L.J. ***Religion in the Primary School: partnership between church and state?*** (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1987).
- Francis, L.J., Fearn, M., Astley, J. and Wilcox, C., ?The relationship between Christian commitment and motivation to study religion at A-level: a preliminary investigation?, ***Journal of Education and Christian Belief***, 3, 1999, 115-122.
- Francis, L.J. and Lewis, J.M., ?Who wants RE? A socio-psychological profile of adolescent support for religious education?, in Astley, J. & Francis, L.J., Christian ***Theology and Religious Education: connections and contradictions***, (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 223-246.
- Murphy, J., ***The Education Act 1870*** (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972). Rich, E.E., ***The Education Act 1870*** (London: Longmans, 1970).
- Schools Council, ***Religious Education in Secondary Schools*** (London: Evans Brothers and Methuen, 1971).

---

[Return to vol. 3 no. 2 index page](#)

---

Created on: January 14th 2010

Updated on: August 19th 2010