



## 'Like a good brisk walk': The Relationship between Faith Stance and Academic Study in the Experience of First Year Theology Students at the University of Oxford

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### Introduction

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Oxford has a syllabus that focuses on the study of the history of Christian Theology. Although in recent years the opportunity to study a non-Christian religion in depth has become part of the syllabus, with teaching largely provided by members of the Oriental Studies faculty, most students still opt to concentrate on areas within Christian Theology: biblical studies; the history of doctrine; Christian ethics; and church history. As in every other faculty or department in the UK, students face the problem of negotiating a course which enables them to explore the interface between their faith commitment and the academic study. Anecdotal evidence over the years has suggested that students deal with this in a variety of ways. Some are determined not to let their

studies affect their faith such that a strict division is enforced. Others find that the interface is one that is personally disturbing and so gradually move away from a previous faith position or, sometimes, with great heart-searching, find one that is either different from what they had when they first came to university or is essentially the same though informed by a critical awareness which was not previously present. The growing numbers of students with a lively faith commitment in institutions of higher education suggest that this is a topic that deserves more detailed consideration.

Academic Theology itself has reached a stage where the conviction that students who come with a naïve faith need to be challenged and learn an approach to religious traditions, which is sceptical and essentially historical in orientation, has been widely questioned. The intellectual dominance of a position that marginalizes faith commitment and its contribution to critical enquiry is now a matter of debate rather than a premise. There has built up over the years a suspicion of academic Theology by faith communities, on the one hand, and, on the other, a suspicion within academic institutions that there is a lack of intellectual rigour on the part of those studying Theology. Pre-existing faith commitments, the institutions might suggest, are allowed to interfere with the dispassionate study of religious traditions and their social context, thus compromising the openness that is a prized part of academic life. Some institutions, therefore, want to restrict the influence of religious traditions within the academy, whilst some proponents of those traditions argue forcefully for a voice in it. In such a situation any emerging partnership requires give and take. So although we may attempt to set the boundaries for the interaction between faith stance and academic study we cannot anticipate all aspects of students' encounter with these questions. This is difficult for the relationship between university Theology and the faith communities because of the questions and challenges to even the most liberal form of religion and because of the indeterminacy that is so central to intellectual life.

Gavin D'Costa in his new book has explored the ambiguous position of departments of Theology and religion in the modern academy and suggests that the place of Theology in modern universities has always been problematic. Religious studies have facilitated the acceptance of Theology in the secular academy. While the pressures to abolish both Theology and religious studies departments have always been there, the mutation of Theology and religious studies into the historical study of religion has meant that they are very much at home in the contemporary humanities.

1. Within higher education at a national level the centrality of these debates to Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) has been recognised as evidenced by the Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies which states:

1.6 The interface between academic study and practising religious communities is complex and significant. Critical analysis may destabilise profoundly held convictions producing sharp rejection of academic study, but may also stimulate real engagement with contemporary concerns. Such study is a major contributor to cross-cultural understanding and the avoidance or challenging of prejudices arising from misinformation. It may also contribute to the articulate self-awareness of particular religious traditions, particularly as religious leaders of several of the traditions represented in Britain have in fact often studied TRS.

These debates are the context for a research project that explores students' experiences in a Faculty of Christian Theology.

The specific questions pursued in this research arose from informal anecdotal discussion that had taken place over many years. Recently, in the Faculty's annual Tutorial Teaching seminar, the role of faith in learning and teaching has become a typical and thought-provoking strand of discussion. The aim in this study was to use these insights gained through day-to-day practice as a starting point for a small, systematic exploration of students' experience, and of tutors' views and perceptions.

The study did not set out to evaluate, or in any sense judge, quality of teaching. Its purpose was to continue an inquiry that had already begun within the faculty on an informal, occasional basis. The findings are not representative of students' experience, nor of tutors' views; they are the outcomes of a preliminary exploration. It is hoped that the findings will generate further, maybe sharper, questions which can in due course be discussed amongst and between

students and tutors.

The study as a whole is subject-specific. Although it aims to make a contribution to describing what it means to be a critical thinker in the humanities in general, it does this by exploring what it means to be a scholar and a believer in Theology. Its primary focus is the interplay between the personal and intellectual challenges for students and tutors.

The questions we set out to investigate were:

- What motivates students to choose to study Theology at the University of Oxford?
- What role, if any, does faith commitment play in that motivation?
- What experience, if any, do first year students have of an interaction between faith commitment and the academic study of Theology?
- How do students construct the issues that arise from such an interaction?
- What strategies, if any, do they employ in the first year of their academic study in response to any perceived conflict or disjunction between their faith commitment and understanding of the requirements of academic study?
- What sources of support do students perceive to be available and how, if at all, do they make use of them?
- How do tutors and others who support students perceive the interaction between faith commitment and academic study?

## Methodology

The project explored the lived experience of first year undergraduate students; it was a qualitative study that sought 'rich' or 'thick' descriptions<sup>2</sup> of this experience. The method chosen to elicit such descriptions was to conduct interviews thorough enough, and across a wide enough range of students, to generate sufficient data of this type.

The project set out to interview thirty students twice: once on arrival in Oxford and again during their third term. Thirty were recruited and participated at the first interview stage; one of these could not be contacted for the Trinity Term interview. Some features of the interview sample are described in Table 1. The sample was generated through two approaches. The project team wrote to all first year Theology students in October 2002. The letter introduced the project, explained what being involved would entail, and clarified the level of confidentiality that would pertain. It invited those who were interested in participating to contact the project team. The letter also advised students that they might be approached directly by the project team. Potential participants were later identified at random within each of three courses (the BA single honours Theology, the BA joint honours Philosophy and Theology, and the vocational BTh) and invited to participate. Four participants responded to the opportunity to volunteer, and the remaining twenty-six, randomly chosen, were invited.

Solely seeking volunteers might have led to three possible problems for the project: too few students volunteering in the time available; a sample of only those students for whom the relationship between faith and academic study was problematic; or, perhaps, even, a sample of only those students with faith. The project was seeking both to produce data from a variety of perspectives, and to harness the spontaneous interest that the project aroused. The sampling approach was successful in achieving these aims.

Each researcher took a cohort of one of the course groups?BTh, BA Theology, and BA Philosophy and Theology. Researchers contacted each selected student individually, by email, to offer them the opportunity to participate in the project, if relevant, and to set up the interview. The interviews, wherever possible, took place on 'neutral' territory such as college meeting rooms. The schedule for the first interviews is outlined in Table 2. The questions relating to the

focus of the project came at the middle of the schedule, with earlier areas of questioning designed to allow the interviewee to develop confidence in both the interviewer and in the interview process, and to build rapport. Those initial questions also provided a context for the subsequent questions about faith and academic study.

Each interview was recorded, with permission from the participant, onto audiotape to enable the researcher to conduct a thorough analysis. Researchers also made contemporaneous notes, which aimed to capture both the subtleties of the interactions that were lost on the recordings and the researchers' own responses to the interviews. These could then be reflected upon, and either used in considering the interview data or set aside. The researchers met as a group with the project adviser twice during the first phase of interviews in order to encourage the continued development of this reflexive approach. These meetings also provided support to the researchers, and minimised the risk that researchers' own—sometimes powerful—responses to the interviews might interfere in the task. It was felt that there was no need of this structure during the later phases of the project.

As the project team discussed the first interview schedule modifications and extensions to the original parameters evolved. One significant example was that the term faith 'stance' rather than 'commitment' was adopted, as a more inclusive way of expressing the variety of standpoints that the anticipated cohort of students might occupy.

The second student interviews were conducted during May and June 2003. The schedule for these interviews—shown in Table 3—was drawn up in light of the data that had begun to emerge both from the first interviews and also from interviews with a small number of tutors that were conducted during Hilary Term 2003 (see below). Again, the heart of the second student interviews related to the role of the tutor and tutorial, and to the interaction between faith and study.

Interviews with tutors aimed to investigate the context within which students are operating. Thus, these were exploratory discussions to determine tutors' perceptions of the intellectual journey that is undertaken by Theology undergraduate students and that journey's relationship to the faith commitment (or absence of commitment) of the student and of the tutor. Potential tutor participants were chosen such that the sample included: those who are chaplains as well as tutors, tutors from each of the three courses, and tutors relatively new to Oxford as well as those with many years' experience. Twelve tutors were approached and invited to participate. All of them agreed. The schedule for the tutor interviews is contained in Table 4.

The analysis of the interview data was undertaken in stages. At each of the three interview phases—the first student interviews, the tutor interviews and the second student interviews—the researchers listened to the tapes after each interview, drawing out the key issues and themes, and, in looking across their set of interviews, highlighting commonalities and differences. These issues, themes, commonalities and differences were circulated amongst the full project team so that all members could see the range of concerns raised throughout the cohort of research participants. Rigour was enhanced by a selection of tapes also being listened to by a member of the team other than the researcher who conducted the interviews concerned. The full team met after each interview phase to consider the provisional findings and, in the light of these discussions, researchers returned to the data to produce a more developed report on each interview set. The final stage in the data analysis process involved examining all nine reports and sets of interviews in order to distil these into the findings presented in the next section of this report and to develop the three case studies that follow it.

## Findings

The project sought to identify and describe a variety of patterns in students' experience. One expected source of variety seemed to be the mix between vocational and academic, and between single-discipline and inter-disciplinary courses. As the research progressed it emerged that there were similarities between the experiences of students across courses as well as significant differences between them. The findings are therefore reported under themes, with differences related to course membership referred to wherever they arise. The themes are: the purpose of tutorials; tutor roles; faith stance and motivation; faith stance and syllabus; and community and support.

In addition to this thematic presentation a series of case studies traces the development of three students. These accounts are intended to describe the fine texture of individual students' experience: they illustrate how the general themes we have delineated are evidenced in contiguous narratives. They are not intended to be representative of general trends or viewpoints within our sample of thirty students. They represent complexity of thought and experience, ambiguity in the environment in which they operate, and variety in their strategies for making sense of the relationship between their faith stance and their academic study.

In the findings report students are identified by both a number and a code to indicate their course (e.g. Student Th 6).

Th = BA Theology

Ph/Th = BA Philosophy and Theology

BTh = Bachelor of Theology

Tutors are identified by a letter (e.g. 'Tutor H').

## Purpose of Tutorials

The purpose of tutorials is to monitor what I've learned and check that what I've deduced from the reading is right; and to make me aware of other ideas, question my arguments and make sure they're justified. [Student Th 5]

The goal of the tutorial is precisely to expose them to other points of view. [Tutor J]

Students and tutors alike—as illustrated in the first quotes above—saw the essential purpose of tutorials as academic learning and development. However, there were differing views about how faith fits into this purpose. Whilst there were students who felt that tutorials ought not to have a faith dimension, others—across all three courses—saw faith as playing a legitimate role in tutorial discussions and essays:

The purpose of tutorials for me is greater than just passing exams; the way that I'm re-examining my faith in an academic light brings new things to it and enhances it, so that at the end of tutorials I nod and think, 'Yeah, this is why I've come to Oxford', because it enriches my outlook. [Student Th 6]

Everybody's preconceptions are going to affect their academic study. My presuppositions include my faith, which may be the most important of my preconceptions ... When I approach the text of the New Testament, I'm starting off with a presupposition because of my experiences and how it's affected me in a positive and real way. [Student Ph/Th 6]

I absolutely think it essential to pray before I write an essay? I am here for spiritual formation. I would much rather write an essay that gets a 2.2 and helps me understand the subject and helps me get to grips with it from a pastoral point of view, than a teaching point of view. [Student BTh 2]

These approaches are presented as being private, sometimes covert, but deliberate and often the result of much thinking on the part of students.

Tutors described an ambivalent view of the role of personal faith in the tutorial. Tutor A perceived tensions between the imperatives of the syllabus and a potentially fruitful interplay between faith and intellect:

Tutorial essays can have a role in discussions of faith given that relevant topics can arise as intellectual questions in essays, and this ought not to be ruled out; but in practical terms, the

syllabus needs to be covered in the essay and tutorial, and this is the main purpose of this kind of work. In practice, this can be more difficult to uphold; sometimes there is a grey area. [Tutor A]

The features of this 'grey area' were further elaborated by Tutor F, who argued that the tutorial must not become 'spiritual therapy' for the student, and that,

The lines between what constitutes an intellectual or academic issue and what constitutes a faith issue are pretty blurred. [Tutor F]

More specifically, Tutor I comments that the historical papers of the course,

Enable students to be more mature in their faith because it gives them an understanding of the very different sorts of Christianity that have existed.

Many tutors said that they avoided discussion of faith in tutorials altogether. Tutor B was emphatic:

I don't really see how there is an obvious place for it. Thus, if a student includes a 'sermon' in an essay, s/he will be instructed not to do so, and will not do it again. [Tutor B]

The view, shared by most tutors and most students, it would seem, is that, while personal faith is seen as relevant, making it explicit is outside the boundaries of tutorials and essays. (There were exceptions to this view, which will be outlined below.)

Most tutors, however, have experienced students raising issues of personal faith, implicitly, within a tutorial or class setting. These occurrences seem to be picked up by tutors almost intuitively. In the experience of Tutor F, students often speak 'in code':

What they present as a purely intellectual problem may be something that's actually worrying them. [Tutor F]

Tutor E noted that issues of a student's personal faith were often discernible in their body language. Tutor J commented that students could appear embarrassed at raising issues of faith in a tutorial. Although one tutor commented that he had,

never felt students were particularly interested in raising these issues explicitly for discussion, [Tutor E]

several students expressed the hope that discussions of faith would occur in tutorials and perceived signals that such discussion was undesirable. Student Ph/Th 6 recounted that one tutor had made it perfectly clear that the tutorial was not the place for discussion of personal belief, because:

[faith perspectives do not need to be involved in the academy. [Reported by Student Ph/Th 6]

Many students seemed to want to be more open in discussing the interplay between their studies and their faith, but one imagines that it takes considerable courage?or, as some might argue, a lack of clarity about the task?to do so.

Student Th 2 was an example of a student who is open in discussing his faith, his account of his views and behaviour contrasting sharply with those of the tutors and students described so far in this section. He said that,

The purpose of my essays is to sermonize ? I always end up having a life-application in my conclusion, which my tutor is all right about, but he says it's not academic. [Student Ph/Th 2]

However, it is also the case that two tutors stated ways in which they, too, explicitly raise or acknowledge issues of personal faith in their tutorials. At initial meetings with students, for example, Tutor D asks them whether faith is a help, a hindrance or irrelevant to academic work in that particular paper. Tutor H does not wish tutorials and lectures to be an intellectual exercise alone; he gave an example of the interplay between intellectual discussion and faith:

I had a student today who said he enjoyed my lectures and he could tell I was a believer.  
[Tutor H]

He did not explain how he responded but one imagines that fruitful discussion might have ensued. It seems that the tutor sets the tone about how faith might or might not appropriately be brought to bear on the student's academic work.

## Tutor Roles

Both tutors and students identified a multiplicity of roles that tutors play. For both groups, the academic role of the tutor is paramount but, at times, each group observes tensions between those roles. Several students perceived their tutors to have a pastoral concern for their welfare and development throughout their time at University. Student Th 7 said:

I'd like to say that a tutor's role is to help me grow as a person ? and I think most of them want us to get to that place where we can think for ourselves and think about things more deeply, but I think a lot of the time their role is to get you to pass an exam. [Student Th 7]

This was echoed by Tutor J, who identified his role as maintaining a balance between examination preparation and a general interest in the development of the student. Thus far these tensions, no doubt, are not specific to Theology and may be recognisable within many subject areas. However, they acquire a heightened significance when experienced in conjunction with particular stances about the role of faith.

Tutor B expressed the hope that students perceive the role of the tutor as wholly academic, 'and so in principle it is a neutral role' with regard to issues of faith. By contrast, some students, especially those pursuing the vocational BTh, emphasised a tutor's faith-based, pastoral role. Student Th 4 said:

[My tutor] covers all the critical agenda, but he will also spend time talking about the fact that it is going to affect your faith, and he's struggled with the same issues and wants to make sure that you can talk about that, so he'll ask pointed questions to make you think in a different way [about issues] from a Christian perspective ? Ideally a tutor is somebody who is there for you, so someone with whom you can talk about academic issues and about your spiritual life and how it's developing. [Student Th 4]

Similarly, Student Th 2 commented:

The pastoral care is quite key, and I suppose with any queries about faith or academic theories which don't link in with faith, then it's a personal tutor's place to show how they do link in with

faith. [Student Th 2]

Tutor J, who teaches BTh students, also recognised that some students may seek professional guidance in relation to their faith, and may thus look to their tutors to legitimise, in a professional capacity, their faith opinions as candidates for ordination. Tutor H sensed that students who have faith:

Want our [tutorial] talk to give them clarity for their own faith. (Tutor H)

Tutor A recognised that students who raise issues of faith in tutorials are often prompted to do so because their study is affecting their understanding of faith in some way, which he sees as legitimate, but this raises tensions between his academic and pastoral responsibilities and how these are carried out in the context of the tutorial:

If you can't contain it within the bounds of the Theology course, as it were, then I suppose I'd rather view it as a pastoral matter ? and as a tutor, I've always regarded myself as having pastoral responsibilities for the students I teach. [Tutor A]

It is not clear whether these 'pastoral responsibilities' are undertaken during or outside the tutorial itself. However, he is clear that it is a central part of his role to attend to student needs beyond the academic:

The relationship between the tutor and the tutee is a personal, not an impersonal, relationship; at the other end, it's a personal relationship, not a private relationship, because it's a professional relationship. [Tutor A]

Most tutors expressed the view that there is, on the one hand, a professional role demanding a fixed focus upon academic matters within tutorials, lectures and classes. On the other, they noted that tutorial teaching in particular encourages the formation of a relationship between tutor and student. For the majority of tutors faith-related issues were regarded as pastoral concerns most appropriately addressed after or outside the tutorial:

A tutorial is not a place of spiritual direction. [Tutor G]

This is consistent with the views explored in the previous section ('Purpose of tutorials'), although, clearly, the pressures on the boundaries of the tutorial can be considerable.

For many students it was the scholarly status of tutors that lent credibility to them as role models with respect to personal faith. Students often commented that they felt reassured in their faith commitment precisely because so many well-respected academics in Oxford were also practising Christians. This perspective was recognised by some tutors:

I hope they [students] would see me as someone capable of a whole range of academic views and as a person of faith. It is good for them to see that one can study Theology and be a person of deep faith. [Tutor G]

[Students want to know] how I can be a believer and an academic theologian at the same time. The world would say anyone who has any brains wouldn't believe any of this. Students come to me and complain that they can't tell a lecturer's faith position. [Tutor H]

However, one tutor, an ordained member of the Church but not a College chaplain, insisted that he resists the need

that students might have to place him into a box marked 'believer':

I like to reserve the right to wear an academic hat and to pursue academic questions wherever they lead, without feeling constrained. [Tutor E]

Some tutors reported telling students explicitly that issues of personal faith are not directly related to academic understanding and success. Tutor F related how he states at the beginning of a course of tutorials that the student's work will not be assessed according to whether the tutor agrees with the student's faith opinions. Tutor K described feeling that students understand that he has different roles and commitments as a tutor and chaplain, and that consequently he may say and do different things in different settings.

Most tutors confirmed that they do not initiate discussion of their own faith stance with students in a tutorial, class or lecture. There were exceptions, however. A few identified that it is inherent in the nature of teaching for a tutor gradually to share his or her personal values and opinions with students. Tutor D asks students in an initial meeting what they expect from him as a tutor and explains his approach by saying:

The majority would have some suspicion of someone who teaches a particular moral tradition, such as the Christian tradition, who does not have any sort of personal commitment to it? They don't want me to speak about my own opinions all the time, which I'd hate to do, but briefly and roughly they want to know what sort of a person I am. [Tutor D]

Another tutor reported that he consciously ensures that his own faith views are revealed clearly in tutorial discussions because he does not want,

? to undermine their faith or throw up obstacles which make them think that their beliefs are irrational or that the Christian tradition has got it all wrong. [Tutor H]

Few tutors have felt under explicit pressure to reveal their faith stance to students. Most feel that it is only appropriate to discuss their own faith stance in a reactive, non-academic setting.

Students at times seemed to project a faith stance or a faith-oriented role onto their tutors:

For me and the tutor there has to be an interest in the subject beyond what's discussed in that room. There must be something beyond the tutor simply wanting to give me a grade, because it's implicit in the nature of the subject that they're broadening your faith horizons. [Student Th 6]

Some further interpreted tutor interventions in tutorials as reflections of tutors' personal faith:

In tutorials he seemed to personally reject things that I and the majority of Christians would say are integral to the Christian faith. [Student Ph/Th 5]

A Christian tutor will bring a tutorial round to a faith-based answer, or to a life-application', whereas 'a non-Christian tutor' will reach conclusions which 'end up completely slating Christianity. [Student Th 2]

Consequently, within these students' conceptions of the tutor's role, the impact of tutors' comments and opinions can

acquire meanings that may not occur to the tutor. Student Th 9 described feeling hurt and offended by one tutor's perceived 'anti-Catholic views'. Student Th 2 took the view that 'dangerous, liberal teaching' exists in the University, and illustrated his point by describing his tutor's 'false' interpretation of biblical texts to support pre-marital sex, homosexuality, and an authoritative role for women in the Church.

On a more general level, some students struggled to see the point of pursuing the questions that are considered worth exploring by tutors:

A lot of what scholars and tutors come up with is so ridiculous; they fascinate themselves with minor little points ? and I could never ever be able to agree with my tutors ? Tutors seem to argue with everybody; they don't seem to come to any useful conclusion about what they're reading; they just want to take it to pieces ? and I couldn't see the point in doing essays when tutors wouldn't value or listen to what you're arguing. [Student Th 10]

This student, in common with several others interviewed, seemed to be suggesting that her whole framework for thinking and believing is not recognised, represented or valued in academic work. Whether or not this is what tutors intend is not the central issue here, though; what this student's perceptions, and others presented in this section, illustrate most tellingly is the power that students invest in tutors.

## **Faith Stance and Motivation**

There seemed to be some development between the first and second interviews in students' motivation to study Theology at Oxford in the ways this was related to their faith stance. Some students seemed to find it unproblematic during the first interviews, as they started their courses, but by the end of the year their perceptions of the relationship had become more complex.

Many students interviewed came to study Theology at Oxford because of their faith commitment. For some, there was a vocational element, too; all of those undertaking the BTh are aiming for a professional role in the Anglican Church in some capacity. Many of this group articulated, at the second interview, how their studies had influenced their motivation further during the year:

If it [my motivation] has changed in any way it's in my discovering in myself a real need not so much as to just fulfil certain requirements for ordination, but to dig deeper. For example, how does scripture really affect me on a deeper level? How will the study of the sacraments change my view of them? So I think it [my study of Theology] has become a lot more personalised. [Student BTh 8]

The only thing that has changed is the depth of my appreciation ? For me, Theology can't ever be just an academic discipline, you can't dispassionately study Theology, or at least if you do, then you miss the whole point of it. [Student BTh 2]

The vocational dimension was present for students pursuing BA degrees as well, albeit from a more exploratory starting point:

It's always been mainly to explore the possibility of training for Church orders, and that hasn't changed. [Student Th 8]

[I take the course] far more seriously in a way, because it's now become vocational ? but it's always been a spiritual course of study for me, so that I can know more about God. [Student Th

Even for those students whose motivation contained no vocational element, their commitment to academic theological enquiry was described as related to their faith stance. Some described a dynamic whereby academic study is pursued for its own sake but where, separately, or as a bonus, it enriches or tests their faith. Others described a reciprocal relationship where faith and academic study interrogate each other:

My academic life was always a journey corresponding with my faith, but that's not to say that one affects the other in a negative way. We all need to keep re-evaluating our faith just to make sure that we still believe it ? so my motivation is to study the subject in an academic context as I did at school, and so bring my religious life and academic life together. [Student Th 6]

Faith is the most important part of my life ? I would say this is all a project of faith seeking understanding. [Student Ph/Th 3]

Studying Theology is] a challenge to my faith ? I want to challenge, and by challenge confirm. [Student Ph/Th 1]

By the second interview?the end of the first year?one student was able to report:

I (now) have a faith that is bound up in fact and historical knowledge: if a faith is true it should be able to stand up to theological and historical questioning [Student Th 2]

Tutor H, echoing Student Th 2's experience, remarked that there was scope for the intellectual fathoming of personal faith among students:

For a student trying to figure out how Jesus can be God and man, a tutorial with the right tutor can help them sort this thing out in an academic setting.

Tutor B, similarly, in speculating about students' motivation, suggested that students often seek to discover on an intellectual level more about the faith commitment they already have. Those who do not have a faith commitment, it was noted, might equally choose to do Theology at Oxford because they wish to discern a more robust reason not to believe; or they might wish to develop skills of empathy in seeking to understand people who do have faith.

Other students?nearly half of the sample of those studying for the BA degree?considered that academic interest alone was the motivation for studying Theology. Student T/P 4 decided on Theology and Philosophy because he enjoys examining 'controversy and conflict'. One BA student hinted that his overriding academic motivation may be a reflection of the style of the degree course:

[My motivations are] purely academic ? the way you study in Oxford is not very theological, it's more of a historical and literary study of the Bible. [Student Th 3]

For one student his year of academic study had the effect of undermining his initial faith-based motivation. Whereas he had originally chosen to study the subject because he was, 'Religious and wanted to test my faith, and see if it all really was true', he now says that,

It's a lot more difficult to call myself religious ? because there are so many problems [for faith] ra

ised by study which are easier to ignore if you're not studying Theology ? and I think the reason that there are so many problems is that it simply isn't true. [Student Th 1]

He described himself now as being primarily motivated by academic, rather than spiritual, inquiry. He seemed to view this change in motivation as a negative experience. Similarly, Student Th 7 said that although she is interested in the subject, she now felt her motivation for studying Theology had changed:

I must admit it feels like I'm stuck here [with Theology] now ? I do enjoy it, but here at Oxford there are lots of ups and downs, and in the middle of term I thought I didn't want to study Theology any more because I wasn't enjoying the work, but now I'm a bit more interested in it again. But it's more for interest's sake, less so than faith, like it was at the beginning, because I'm realising how difficult it is having a faith and maintaining that with the study of Theology. So I would definitely not say now that I'm studying Theology for my faith, but that I'm really enjoying Oxford, and I happen to do Theology. [Student Th 7]

She seemed less troubled by this shift than Student 1. Her approach now aligns with others on the BA programme who said that their motivation had always been solely academic.

A change in motivation?in the opposite direction?appears to have been a positive experience for a different BA student, who, by the end of the year, said that his motivation for studying Theology had become:

To know God better. Theology is one interesting way of knowing and loving God. [Student Th 3]

His motivation at the start of the year had been one solely of intellectual curiosity. He had 'become a Christian' within a few weeks of starting the course in Michaelmas term, and as a result his motivation was now 'absolutely driven by faith'. Student T/P 7 also experienced a change in motivation: although she still described herself as 'religious', she learned through the year that, while she recognised that Jesus is central to Christianity, He was not central to her faith, and thus she had decided that she was not a Christian.

## **Faith stance and syllabus**

On the whole, only a few students were able to articulate responses to questions in this area. Tutors, understandably, had far more to say.

Several students said that they chose Theology courses offered at Oxford because they perceived them to be more traditional than those offered at other Universities. Many commented that Theology and/or Religious Studies courses at other universities were too comparative and did not focus upon Christianity enough. It was not the focus on Christianity but the academic stance and its absence of reflexivity that at least one student criticised:

I'm not sure if Theology is what it says it is: Theology at Oxford is a really interesting subject, but it isn't what it claims to be, because Theology is the study of God and you can only grasp God through love, not through study ? Tutors aren't doing Theology; they're doing history, or literary criticism, or philosophy ? I think they should be more open about their methodology, about what presuppositions they have?honesty is important. [Student Th 3]

Among the BTh students, there appeared to be a widely-held opinion that the nature and purpose of the BTh course is vastly different from the BA courses. Student BTh 10 observed a contrast between the 'BA approach' to the study of

Theology? which 'encourages individuals to be detached and intellectually honest'? and that required for the BTh, which, by implication is seen as more practical (and less rigorous, perhaps). For one BTh student, on the other hand, an initially vocational, almost simplistic, outlook developed into one that accommodated complexity and uncertainty:

I had this idea that if I went to Bible College I would be given all the answers, but now I realise that this is quite a simplistic view of God and faith; you can't box God up into a two year course. [Student BTh 3]

Though some students explained that studying Theology gave them the opportunity to combine several academic interests, including language, history and literature, as well as religion, many more expressed a particular interest in studying biblical texts and/or doctrinal issues. Student Th 6 is Catholic and chose the doctrinal track in a conscious effort to learn more about Catholic theologians and Christian doctrine:

This will affect the relationship between my study and my faith because it will be directly linked to my faith ? because it's quite a 'traditional' course I can choose a Catholic theologian. I'm lucky ? because I belong to a traditional denomination and I can study and enhance my faith directly. [Student Th 6]

As with this student, a number of others' choices about pursuing particular tracks in the syllabus were to some extent determined by their expectations of the potential impact on their faith:

My brother became an atheist through reading Theology, doing biblical studies, so I want to prove to him that that doesn't necessarily happen. [Student Th 3]

Another student is pursuing the doctrine track in order to:

? avoid having to study as much of the Bible as possible ? because although it probably wouldn't happen ? there's a danger of focusing too much on the Bible and being told [by scholars] that it's all rubbish. [Student Th 2]

The opinion that biblical studies can challenge one's faith stance more directly than other aspects of the course was widely shared among students. ,

## Endnotes

- Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Education: The Virtue of Theology in a Secular World*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming. We are grateful to Gavin for making available parts of his book in advance of publication.
- See Gilbert Ryle, 'Thinking and reflecting' and 'The thinking of thoughts: what is 'le penseur' doing?' in *Collected Papers*, II (London: Hutchinson, 1971); Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)
- One student changed from Theology to a different discipline between the first and second interviews. As a result the data from this interview, though interesting, was not useful for the purposes of this project.

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