

## Using Theology and Religious Studies

Author: Stephen Pattison

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## Introduction

This report<sup>1</sup> describes the background and content of a course specifically designed for level three, final year students in religious and theological studies at Cardiff University. The course is designed to enable students to apply their intellectual, subject based and transferable skills beyond religious studies (RS) so they can explain the relevance of them to people outside RS in the wider world of employment and social life. In addition to describing the background, rationale and content of the course, some evaluatory comments are made about lessons learned by the tutor in the delivery of the course over the two academic sessions 2000-02 to two cohorts of students.

## Background

In 1999, Stephen Pattison, the author of this report, proposed to the Board of the Department of Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff University that there was a need for a module that would enable final year students to

evaluate their education, recognise and develop their subject specific and generic skills and knowledge, and allow them to begin to see how these might be applied outwith the academy and sphere of religion and theology. Pattison was a trained theologian who had also worked in management, health care and the academic discipline of health and social welfare. He thus had wide experience of relating his own TRS training to spheres both in his practical and research work beyond the overtly religious. He was reasonably well placed to help those leaving university to begin to evaluate the relevance of religious studies education and training to wider areas, specifically to the world of employment.

Most TRS students at Cardiff University are not vocationally inclined towards religious involvement and work. They use their degrees as a generic humanities qualification to enter jobs in teaching, management, law, nursing etc. This?together with emergent pressures from government and other sources (via the Subject Benchmarking Statement and the University Employability Policy) to establish and develop the significance of generic and subject specific employability skills within education?added impetus to the need to provide a course that would allow students critically to consider the value of their specific disciplinary training to their involvement in worlds beyond religion and RS, as well as allowing them to continue to expand their knowledge of theology and religious studies and to audit their own skills and learning deficits. The resulting 20 credit module at level three is entitled Using Theology and Religious Studies (UTRS).

At the time of writing (2003), this module had been offered to two cohorts of final year students. In 2000-01, four students took it. In 200-02, nine students enrolled. Provisional enrolments for 2002-03 were up to fourteen. The course is designed for a maximum of 15 participants. This small number maximises the possibilities for personal involvement and assessment and development of generic and subject specific skills and knowledge. In many ways, it can be seen as a 'finishing off' course which helps students:

- to look back on and evaluate their TRS education;
- to articulate its relevance, and to identify skill and knowledge deficits to be met within the course or beyond in lifelong learning;
- to extend their thinking on the nature of religion and the 'religious', beyond conventional foci such as organised religious communities.

## **The aims of UTRS**

UTRS has two main aims:

- To enable students to extend and critically assess the relevance of theological and religious studies insights and methods that they have acquired to the world of work and social life outside overtly religious communities.
- To enable students to recognise and consolidate generic and subject specific skills acquired in the course of studying religious and theological studies and to make good some of the important skills deficits that they identify.

## **Learning outcomes of UTRS**

When students have completed UTRS, they should be able to:

- identify and describe some practice-related action-influencing world views, i.e. faith systems, outwith formal faith communities in the contemporary world;
- describe and define the main elements of some important social and work practices in the contemporary

Western world, specifically that of management, and outline some of the ways in which such practices might be undergirded by inhabited, action-influencing world views or faith systems;

- explain the nature and contemporary significance of some inhabited, action-influencing faith systems and what these might suggest about understandings of religion and the religious;
- outline and evaluate how theological and similar insights and methods might or might not be useful in analysing practice-based faith systems;
- explain how your education and training in religious studies or theology might be used and of relevance in relation to some practices in the worlds of social life and employment;
- describe the subject specific and transferable skills acquired and recognise skill deficits and what might be done to remedy these through lifelong learning;
- demonstrate a competence in e mail and other aspects of computer technology that relate to education and employment.

## **Skill acquisition**

UTRS is self-consciously a course that aims to help students identify and develop subject specific and generic skills, both intellectual and practical. In particular, it helps students to develop the following skills listed in the Cardiff Employability Skills Policy (distinctive skills or those that are particularly emphasised in this module using one, two or three asterisks \* to denote their relative importance or prominence).

### **Area 1?Traditional intellectual skills:**

- Arguing logically
- Applying theory to practice

### **Area 2?New key or core skills:**

- Communication:
  - oral communication in an appropriate medium\*\*;
  - making presentations as an individual and as part of a group\*\*;
  - writing effectively.
- Improving learning and performance\*\*:
  - commitment to lifelong learning\*;
  - understanding one's preferred learning style and methods\*;
  - reflecting on and learn from experience;
  - monitoring and evaluating progress against specific objectives;
  - planning a course of action\*;
  - identifying skills, values, interests and other personal attributes and motivators (career management)\*\*\*.
- Working with others:
  - working as part of a team\*;
  - negotiating with others;

- successfully managing conflict and asserting one's rights.

### **Area 3?Personal attributes:**

- Self reliance:
  - pinpointing strengths and weaknesses\*\*\*;
  - defining and promoting one's agenda and influencing others\*;
  - having a personal sense of self-worth or self confidence\*\*;
  - managing workloads
  - coping with stress.
- Adaptability:
  - applying skills to new contexts, i.e. transferring them\*\*.
- Creativity:
  - recognising, creating, investigating and seizing opportunities.

The module also helps them to acquire and enhance the following skills specified for Religious and Theological Studies graduates in the subject Benchmarking Statement:

### **Generic skills:**

- empathy;
- self discipline;
- self direction;
- independence of mind and initiative;
- attending to others and respect for others' views;
- gathering, evaluating and synthesising others different types of information;
- analytical ability;
- the capacity to formulate questions;
- problem solving;
- presentation skills (oral and written)\*\*;
- IT skills including word processing, using e mail and the web teamwork skills\*\*;
- writing skills.

### **Discipline specific skills:**

- awareness of the multi faceted complexity of religions\*;
- using a number of complementary methods of study\*\*;
- awareness of religions contributions to debate in the public arena;
- awariness of how personal and communal identities are shaped by religion and of the creative and destructive effects of this and how important identities are.

## Key transferable skills:

- communicating information, ideas, arguments, principles and theories by a variety of organised and well presented means\*;
- using appropriate oral and visual means of communication;
- attending to, reproducing and reflecting upon the ideas and arguments of others\*;
- engaging with empathy and integrity with the convictions and behaviours of others;
- working collaborative as a member of a team or group\*\*;
- undertaking independent/self-directed study/learning (including time management) and reflecting upon one's strengths and weakness of as a learner\*\*;
- making use of library resources to compile bibliographies to inform research and enhance presentations;
- using IT and computer skills for data capture;
- identifying source material to support research and enhance presentations;
- demonstrating critical self awareness about one's own beliefs, commitments and prejudices\*\*.

## Teaching methods and assessment

Because UTRS is a small group course which is designed to help individuals appraise and develop their learning, skills and needs, as well as the applicability of these to the world beyond University, the methods used are mostly participative and require active student engagement. There are no formal lectures. Students are required to engage in and design seminars and learning sessions. Some of these are teacher-led, others are student-led. Sometimes students work in pairs or groups. At other times they work alone. All students are required to do at least one solo presentation/facilitation and they are also required to chair discussions.

At all points they are asked to reflect on the techniques and effectiveness of particular teaching styles and methods and they are asked to evaluate their own and others' performances. They are also required to engage in e-mail contact with the tutor and each other between sessions, and feedback on sessions is provided by the same means. Mostly, the tutor will model a method of engaging in learning and then ask students to try it themselves and evaluate it.

Generally, students are required to do some work between sessions such as reading, thinking or taking part in a preparatory exercise, e.g., audit of their own skills and learning. Most student-led sessions are evaluated but not assessed for credit. This allows students to experiment with presentation and facilitation skills without worrying about their final degree classification and so is probably more appropriate than formal assessment. Students are also required to choose topics and to identify how best to approach them.

The net effect of using these methods is to increase presentational and communication skills, to enhance student autonomy and confidence, as well as developing subject specific knowledge and intellectual skills.

Formal formative assessment is provided by students submitting two coursework essays which are commented upon by the tutor. These essays can then be used as a basis for a final summative assessment portfolio of three essays which includes a further essay whose title is devised by the student in consultation with the tutor.

## Syllabus content and shape

The module is delivered in thirty fifty-minute sessions over two semesters. The content of the course is not fixed. This allows the pursuit of different topics and issues that are of particular interest to participants.

The shape of the course is basically as follows.

## **Part 1 Auditing religious and theological skills, methods, competences and insights**

This part occupies the first three sessions. It aims to help students to become aware of and to audit the methods, understandings and competences in theology and religious studies that they possess and do not yet possess. Students are invited to read the subject Benchmarking Statement and the Cardiff Employability Skills Policy and then work out which skills and knowledge they have and have not acquired. This allows the identification of generic and subject specific knowledge, skills and competences and also exposes needs for further training and competence. The tutor then tries to see how far these needs can be appropriately met in the rest of the course. At the end, students return to their audit to see what they have now gained, a process which reinforces their self-assessment and evaluative skills. (A list of the aggregated skill and knowledge deficits identified by the student group in the academic year 2001-02 is attached at Appendix A).

## **Part 2 Preliminary issues about religion in the modern Western world**

This part of the module takes around five sessions and is designed to ensure that students have a competent comprehension of the problematic and contested nature of understanding religion and religions in the modern world. It looks at questions such as, What is religion? What counts as religion in the contemporary world? What are implicit and surrogate religions? Is religion dead or just changed? How can religious and theological studies methods and insights be used in relation to contemporary issues and practices? What are the obstacles to this?

## **Part 3 An analytic paradigm for applying religious and theological insights and skills**

The intellectual aim of the course is to help students to see the relevance or irrelevance of trying to apply the insights, methods and skills acquired in a degree in religious and theological studies to practices outwith formal religion. It is important to model how this might be done, so students are required over nine sessions to introduce and to discuss a paradigm case study analysis of management using the tutor's book, *The Faith of the Managers*. Using this text also has the advantage that students are introduced to a key aspect of employment, namely, management, in which they are likely to have to participate in their subsequent careers, either directly or indirectly.

## **Part 4 Analysing issues and practices in the contemporary world**

The fourth part of the course, which takes up around ten sessions, allows individual students to explore to what extent 'secular' practices and issues may be susceptible to analysis using the insights and methods of religious and theological studies. Such issues/practices might include: the market, medicine, health, science, art, sport, counselling, psychoanalysis, organisations as religious communities, contemporary spiritualities, New Age religion, values, films, and tourism. These topics can be determined according to students' interests to some extent, but a specimen set of topics and questions is provided. (These are provided as Appendix B to this report.) Students are required to present their topic for wider discussion lasting one hour in the group, thus increasing the awareness of all as well as enhancing individuals' presentation and facilitation skills.

At the end of this part of the course, students are in a good position to recognise the potential and limits for seeing 'religious' dimensions of practices and also to evaluate further what the limits of understandings of contemporary religion are, or might be.

## **Part 5 Skills, methods, insights and competences revisited**

This part of the course takes up four sessions. It enable students to revise and evaluate the skills, methods and insights that they have gained in studying religious and theological studies in the light of their studies in this and other courses, and in the light of their employment aspirations. Students revisit their audit of skills, knowledge and competences (subject specific and generic) and evaluate what progress they have made in meeting their perceived deficits. The final session of the course requires students to undertake a mock employment interview in which they have to explain why a degree in religious and theological studies might be of use and of value to a secular employer.

## Evaluating UTRS

Student evaluation of the module is conducted a) by the administration of a standard departmental anonymous questionnaire; b) by an anonymous tutor administered questionnaire, which forms part of the preparation for the final review session; and c) by plenary discussion of student experience and perceptions in the final sessions. Furthermore, the tutor collects *ad hoc* comments in sessions and by asking for e-mail comment as the course progresses.

From all these sources it seems clear that students find this quite a difficult and challenging course, but also a worthwhile one. Most students attend for most sessions?but this might have something to do with the tutor being their Head of Department. There is general agreement that the course clearly attains its specified outcomes. While not being entirely grateful for the amount of presentation and facilitation work required in class, students feel that the course enhances their communication, presentation and thinking skills and makes them better able to talk and think critically in a public way. A number of students express direct appreciation of being made to use e mail and IT skills. All appreciated the tutorial e mail feedback between sessions that attempts to bring rather diffuse subjects and discussions together. They also pointed out that feedback on individual performances delivered by e-mail rather than in public was less embarrassing and more sensitive to student feelings. Most students say that they have become more confident as a result of doing the course (a key need identified in most initial personal audits) and most appreciated working in quite a personal way within a small group with a tutor who at least one or two describe as 'approachable'. One or two students express some disquiet about dismembering the meaning of religion and some find the emphasis on management a bit too much. Most students would value more help with choosing and researching an independent essay title and this is something that will be dealt with better next time the course is delivered. All students also seem glad to have an opportunity to articulate what their degree studies might have equipped them for beyond higher education as all had encountered general skepticism and bemusement about the value of their subject area, except as a training for religious life, or perhaps the life beyond. One student made the following written comment:

This was the first module to spend time actually trying to apply our degree and other skills to the world of work. Had I not taken this module as a third year I, like many of my friends on my course, would have left to ponder these important questions in my spare time. I valued the chance to apply our skills to future career, and to apply 'religious' systems and concepts to external environments, organisations etc.?I never thought of this before.

This comment alone would seem to vindicate the importance of running a course of this kind, even if the actual content and methods require some further refinement to meet student needs.

## Issues arising from the course

A number of interesting issues and perceptions arise from student participation in, and feedback from, the course.

First, it is clear that students do not enroll on TRS degrees because they wish to develop employability skills. The language of employability, skills, competences, transferability etc. is still essentially alien and often perceived as irrelevant by current Cardiff students. They are still subject-centred in their choice of course. This puts a question

mark from the 'customers' against the prominence that government and university authorities give to this element in higher education. When introduced to concepts pertaining to employability, students feel that they have to learn a new language 'game' (their word not mine). It is debatable whether subject specialist teachers are the best people to help them to learn it and realise its importance. Students also find the language of learning outcomes obscure and difficult, according to their feedback forms. Are those of us who teach in danger of too enthusiastically adopting the technocratic argot of skills, competences, outcomes etc., to the long term detriment of the real interest that students actually seem to have in the subject they have selected to study?

Secondly, the course has exposed a number of deficiencies in overall modular course provision. So, for example, some students can get through a TRS degree without considering the overall nature of the subject/discipline area, they may not necessarily be exposed to the contested nature of understandings of religion. They may often fail to realise that skills learned in specific courses and areas, e.g., language and textual interpretation skills, have a wider reference or relevance beyond particular subject areas. I am constantly surprised that students seldom allude to textual interpretation skills as having relevance in a wider context beyond TRS, and many of them do not understand words such as **systematic, dogmatic, phenomenological, linguistic, hermeneutical, empirical, speculative, social scientific**, which are mentioned in the subject Benchmarking Statement which they review early on in the course. On a more prosaic level, it has become apparent that some students had not had to use the internet or journal articles before doing this module, while it also seems to be the case that others had never had to read a whole book critically during the course of their higher education in TRS. This may point to the need to provide a more integrated syllabus in terms of content and skills in Cardiff specifically. However, it also raises questions about the appropriateness of modular, free choice degree schemes in general, particularly as they might relate to joint honours students who only take half the TRS course. Such consumer choice oriented offerings may inadvertently allow, or even encourage students to avoid the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are integral to the successful, systematic study of the discipline as well as to employability.

Thirdly, and slightly sadly, I think I must report that I think this course is better at exposing knowledge and skill deficits than it is in meeting these. Ultimately, while most students value the way in which the course helps them to articulate the benefits and skills acquired in a TRS degree, they are skeptical that such skills and insights can really be appropriately applied outwith the narrow realm of traditional organized religion. So if the hope of TRS academics is that we can and should help students to apply their skills outside this realm, we need to do much more to articulate and demonstrate how this can really be done. Furthermore, only a limited amount can be done with third year students to remedy skills deficits, if they have not been dealt with earlier in the scheme of study or perhaps before students arrive at university.

## Conclusion

UTRS is an innovative course designed to help final year TRS students to be able to identify, evaluate and develop their overall subject knowledge as well as to recognise and develop transferable skills, knowledge and competences. It succeeds in doing this to quite a large extent. Student participation also indicates that a course like this is not enough in and of itself to really bridge the gap between subject specific education and employability. If the relevance and applicability of TRS knowledge, insight and skill is to be taken seriously, as government and university authorities seem to imply it should be, then it will be necessary for Cardiff University, and perhaps others, to do far more work throughout the degree syllabus to embed and develop critical consciousness and awareness of transferability. However, it may be asked whether this is the most appropriate turn for a subject area where students appear to enroll because they are actually interested in the disciplinary area as such rather than because it leads directly to employability or the development of very applicable insights, methods and skills in the worlds of work and society outwith the formally religious context.

## References

Pattison, S. (1997) *The Faith of the Managers*, London, Cassell Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000). *Handbook for Academic Review*, Gloucester, QAA

## Appendix A:

### Skill deficits identified by UTRS students 2001-02

- E-mail?mail merger, distribution lists etc
- IT skills?internet, more advanced knowledge of how computers work-how to use spreadsheets, different drives etc.
- Managing people and situations?standing out from crowd, organising situations and projects, appropriate authority
- Speaking in public
- Communication skills?communicating orally in groups, presenting personal opinions and views confidently
- Groupwork and teamwork skills?good communication skills, negotiation skills, able to compromise, leadership skills etc.
- Time management skills
- Presentation skills?oral and written
- Research skills?gathering, evaluating and synthesising different kinds of information
- Reading accurately and attentively
- Computing skills
- Managing and running things
- Motivation
- Business organizational skills/knowledge?creating business ideas, understanding how businesses function within a hierarchy etc.
- Subject specific skill deficits
- Evaluating other religions traditions
- Understanding meaning and use of complementary methods of study?systematic, dogmatic, phenomenological, linguistic, hermeneutical, empirical, speculative, social scientific
- How religions contribute to the public arena in terms of values, truth, beauty, identity, health, peace, justice.

## Appendix B:

### Topics/questions suggested for student analysis in Section 4 of the course

- Is science a kind of religion?
- Is faith more important than scientific knowledge in medicine?
- What might some of the critical insights and methods of theology and religious studies reveal about modern concepts and practices relating to health and disease?
- Is modern counselling a faith system? Do its practices owe anything to those traditionally associated with religion in Western society?

- Has the market taken over the features and functions of God and providence in modern society?
- Is Generation X a faithless generation?
- Have contemporary notions of spirituality got anything to do with religion as traditionally understood?
- How might a religious/theological studies perspective be illuminative in looking at aspects of the life and work of organisations?
- Using some of the insights and methods of religious and theological studies, discuss the nature of and significance of storytelling and mythmaking in some parts of the modern world, e.g., in the arena of health or of organisations.
- Is novelist David Lodge right to see tourism as a modern form of the religious quest and pilgrimage?
- Much of the language and many of the attributes that were formerly associated with God in Western society are not dispersed into other areas of life and discourse. Do you think this is true? Discuss the significance of this kind of thinking in relation to Don Cupitt's recent attempts to write 'a theology in everyday speech'.
- Is the cinema the best place to go to explore contemporary faith systems and practices?
- To what extent might humour and laughter be seen as religious activities in the modern world?

## Endnotes

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A report prepared for the PRS-LTSN (now the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy) on a level three module designed to help final year Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) students to develop and relate their education and skills to employment and the 'secular world'.

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