



## ?Do They Really Believe That??: Experiential Learning Outside the Theology and Religious Studies Classroom

Author: Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush

---

Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L: 1741-4164

Volume: 10

Number: 1

Start page: 55

End page: 72

---

[Return to vol. 10 no. 1 index page](#)

---

At Bath Spa University, thanks to 'mini-project' funding from the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, and in partnership with colleagues from Newport and York St. John Universities, we are engaged in a project to explore and enhance the use of experiential and fieldwork learning within Theology and Religious Studies. The main outcomes planned for the 'Living Religion' project are:

- a survey of departments to discover how widespread is the use of experiential elements;
- increased opportunities for fieldwork placements gained from sharing ideas and resources;
- provision of on-line support materials; and
- to encourage a dialogue about religion as lived experience.

We value experiential learning as providing for students a direct encounter with Cultural and Religious Diversity which may sometimes also 'court controversy' as students are brought face to face with beliefs, values and lifestyles which they may not share and which may even be directly opposed to their own.

Cultural and Religious Diversity denotes the plurality of beliefs and values that characterises modern Britain. However, the nature and relationship of both culture and religion are contested. For example, opinions differ on the meaning and status of culture and religion: whether culture is an unambiguously human creation whereas religion has a divine or transcendent source; if culture is believed to be a stable inheritance or it is in a constant process of creation; and if religion is believed to possess an essence and true existence or if it is identified as an act of imagination associated with the modern West with only a derivative and dependent reality (Cush, 2008: 48-49; Lincoln, 2000: 409; Nesbitt, 2004: 139; Smith, 1982: xi). Opinions also differ on the connection and scope of culture and religion: sometimes culture and religion are seen as interchangeable, sometimes as incommensurable; while culture may be regarded as incorporating religion or, alternatively, religion may be deemed to include and extend beyond, or even above, culture (Cush, 2008: 48; Hulsether, 2005: 500). In such circumstances, the phrase Cultural and Religious Diversity points to a range of conceptual issues.

Moreover, Cultural and Religious Diversity is only one, albeit complex, dimension of the wider Equality and Diversity agenda. Consequently, while Cultural and Religious Diversity presents itself particularly prominently within Theology and Religious Studies, other aspects such as age, disability, gender and sexuality are also encompassed by the overarching Equality and Diversity agenda. Indeed, since cultures and religions, on whatever definition, have norms and expectations that are relevant to features of this wider agenda, they offer ethical perspectives on and insights into conduct and lifestyle. In turn, these pose their own problems, while also affording exciting opportunities, for students encountering lived religion given that, as Weller (2008:192) observes, there are '[t]ensions [b]etween the "[s]trands" ' of Equality and Diversity (an obvious issue in the news and in our recent research experience being attitudes to diverse sexual orientations).

Questionnaires were sent by email to 40 Theology/Religious Studies Departments with a response rate of 19 out of 40. Fourteen of the nineteen respondents indicated that departments do offer experiential elements here defined as students engaging directly with religious practitioners in their own settings (rather than say as visiting speakers). It might be presumed that those who did not respond are less likely to be engaged in these activities, but it is interesting that the five departments who did not do so cited mainly practical difficulties. Thus at least one in three departments offer experiential elements which were discovered to be mainly of four types: the day visit, to a place of worship or religious interest, usually led by a tutor; the study visit abroad (e.g. India, Korea, Egypt); the fieldwork placement in a specific community and the vocational placement in, for example, youth work or for ministerial training. One interesting discovery was that not one department had a specific policy on experiential learning, an omission the project seeks to rectify.

To focus on our own institution, which offers Religious Studies but not Theology, we offer day visits, a study visit abroad (South Korea) and a one-week fieldwork placement in a religious community. Such elements have been considered a vital part of the curriculum for several decades and have been given a high priority in our use of resources. At this point it is appropriate to explore the rationale for this stress on experiential elements.

By experiential elements we mean learning opportunities that involve students in meeting members of faith communities in their own centres and places of worship. One obvious resonance here is with experiential learning. Again, there is much disagreement about how to define it, given that any definition inevitably involves a specific view of both experience and learning so that if there is a consensus it consists in the claim that experiential learning connotes a special sense of experience that informs a distinctive kind of learning. Nevertheless, one definition that has much to recommend it has been proposed by McGill & Warner Weil (1989: 248) as follows:

The process whereby people individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter, then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and

seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential learning therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone.

This definition conveys two of the vital features of experiential elements in Theology and Religious Studies, these being direct encounter, in our case with religious people in religious places, and reflection on this experience, in our case often associated with assessment. Jennifer Moon (1994: 120) suggests that experiential learning has certain connotations, among which is the unmediated nature of the process that is based upon direct experience and active engagement as well as the role of reflection and the availability of feedback. Crucially, experiential learning is framed by what Moon (1994: 120) calls the 'formal intention to learn' and is believed to offer 'a favoured manner of learning'. These two features clearly cohere with the inclusion of experiential elements within Theology and Religious Studies where they are embedded in student programmes and where, we wish to argue, they do indeed offer an especially valuable learning opportunity that can foster genuine respect for and appreciation of another lifeworld.

Yet experiential elements have another resonance?religious experience. The term religious experience is in common currency yet, arguably for this reason, lacks clarity and focus (Fitzgerald, 2000: 125). In part, this reflects debate about religion as *sui generis* and thus about religious experience as distinct and different from other types of experience (Connolly, 1999: 137; Merkur, 2005: 173). Although it is necessary to bear in mind that religious experience is difficult to define, for present purposes it is more pertinent to note that there may be more of a division within Theology and Religious Studies since, while this contrast can be overstated, Theology students may be working within a familiar religious context whereas Religious Studies students tend to be dealing with a variety of religions without necessarily any commitment to any of them. Thus, in general terms, given the explicitly Religious Studies ethos of our course, we are concerned to provide students with experience of religions. That being said, we cannot exclude the possibility that students will have religious experiences, probably more likely during extended and intensive study though, of course, possible in any visit or placement. Such experiences may be welcome or?and this is the significant issue?unwelcome. Especially in the latter instance, there is an ethical dilemma between openness to the transformative potential of lived religion and the importance of maintaining personal integrity in the face of challenge. Here, in the clash between understanding and empathy, on the one hand, and believing and endorsing, on the other hand, for us at least, is one way in which experiential elements court controversy even if we recognise that this may not be a major concern across Theology and Religious Studies at least in the same form.

The point is that experiential elements do allow for a rich and deep form of learning. It is not that students do not meet Cultural and Religious Diversity in the classroom, whether through interaction with members of staff, visiting speakers or each other, not ignoring textbooks, documentaries and other sources of information and insight.

Nevertheless, learning in the classroom can be complemented and/or critiqued by learning outside the classroom where that learning is holistic and contextualised, occurring in the company of religious people and on their sacred ground.

## Day visits

At Bath Spa University experiential elements include day visits and it is perhaps worth noting that similar activities emerge as the most common form of experiential element in the survey we conducted of Theology and Religious Studies departments. These are group visits to religious centres and places of worship led/accompanied by a tutor or lecturer but in which students interact with members of faith communities. These visits are arranged for first year students on both the compulsory core module that introduces a range of new religions and alternative spiritualities along with issues in and methods of studying them and the optional modules focused on major religious traditions.

One of these optional modules introduces Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism and for this module a day visit is arranged to Bristol. The reason for this is the limited diversity of the city of Bath, suggested by the 2001 census figures which show that 72% of the population returned as Christian and, of those residents who indicated a religious

affiliation of any kind, Christians constituted 98% (Bath and North East Somerset Faith Forum, 2010: 6). There are Sikhs but no Sikh group even though there is a Sikh representative on the local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education). Bath Sikhs themselves go to Bristol to attend gurdwara. There are a number of Buddhist groups, four Tibetan in character (Bath Diamond Way, Bath Jamyang, Bath New Kadampa and Bath Sakya Groups), the multi-tradition Bath Buddhist Group and, in nearby Keynsham, a Soka Gakkai Group. None of these groups have their own centres. There is a Hindu group that is looking towards building its own temple but as of yet is still meeting in rented premises. Therefore, in order to enable students to gain experience of Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism, we go to Bristol which has a larger religious minority presence. Students visit the Shri Guru Nanak Prakash Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Lam Rim Bristol (a Tibetan Buddhist Centre combined with the Centre for Whole Health offering complementary medical services and courses in various 'Eastern' arts and disciplines) and the Hindu Temple (Bristol) (founded as the Sanatan Deevya Mandal in 1979 in what was once a Methodist Church). Of the students who completed a questionnaire about this day visit, none had previously visited a gurdwara and only a small proportion had visited a Buddhist or Hindu place of worship. In part, this may reflect the nature of the University's intake which remains predominantly regional with a majority of students drawn from the South-West and Wales where, with some notable exceptions, there are fewer opportunities for such visits.

The day visit for the compulsory core module was to Glastonbury. While Bath has a strong and vibrant alternative scene, Glastonbury has a special reputation as a place of pilgrimage where pilgrims will find a vast assortment of resources and services for spiritual development. Glastonbury is a small Somerset town, about an hour from Bath, with a rich Christian heritage both historical and mythological combined with a strong New Age and Pagan presence and a variety of 'Eastern' influences including Hindu and Buddhist ideas and groups (Bowman, 2005: 159-164, 169-173). What Glastonbury offers is a very different type of diversity where that diversity is religious but not cultural as it often is in minority religions with a particular ethnic or migrant profile (Bowman, 2009: 167) It may be subcultural, of course, in that its diversity is located in the presence of a particular 'post- Hippy' subculture. On this occasion, students went to the Goddess Temple where they were addressed by a priestess, the Isle of Avalon Foundation where they listened to a druid speaker and Chalice Well Gardens where they saw the well which is identified as the resting place of the Holy Grail but also with the Goddess as well as visiting the Tor and some specialist shops. Most of the students who completed a questionnaire about this day visit indicated that they had had none or very limited experience of practitioners of these New Age and Pagan religions. In terms of prior experience of Glastonbury in particular, some had visited previously (one or two lived nearby) though mainly to go shopping or see the tourist attractions rather than to make pilgrimage.

It should be added that these day visits are integral to the modules concerned and attempts are made to bring together the lecture and seminar programme, recommended reading and the visits in order to avoid a shallow and superficial encounter that more resembles tourism than research (cf. Geaves, 2007: 248-249).

Before considering student responses and reactions to these day visits, it is worth setting out why we believe such experiential elements to be so important. Take the now famous example of Ron Geaves' account of bringing first year students to the Baba Balaknath Mandir in Walsall where a nominally Hindu temple containing images of Sikh gurus and Sant masters presided over by a priest who rejected the title of pandit in preference to that of bhagat and who self-identified as Sikh rather than Hindu and with both Sikh and Hindu worshippers unified by their shared Punjabi background (Geaves, 1996). The contrast with the conventional model of religions as discrete reified entities is striking as is the mismatch with official orthodoxy where a Jat Sikh, not wearing the Five Ks that symbolize Khalsa membership, has a family history of priesthood dedicated to Baba Balaknath who is conceived as an incarnation of the Hindu deity, Skanda, and as a forerunner of the first Sikh guru, Nanak (Geaves, 1996). To say the least, those first year students were presented with a version of religions that diverge markedly from standard textbook portrayals and with the dominant images of religion, for instance, the features generally attributed to Sikhism defined on the Khalsa model emerging from the modern Tat Khalsa reforms. What students stood to gain from this, therefore, was a nuanced understanding of lived religion, a snapshot of a particular religious community at a particular time (cf. Geaves, 2007: 246), that incorporated, even if in a very limited sense, some anthropological or ethnographic data.

The significance of lived religion is increasingly being acknowledged. Vasudha Narayanan (2000) has argued against the hegemony of a textual model of Hinduism, particularly at introductory level, choosing instead to emphasise local independent goddesses and musicians and dancers who do not claim Vedic origins for their arts and insisting that there is a multitude of voices to which we should listen. In order to do this, it is necessary to move beyond a textual approach and a more anthropological or ethnographic methodology has been employed in many recent studies such as those focused upon Buddhism in diaspora (Wuthnow & Cadge, 2004: 363). This methodology is particularly appropriate when examining new trends and movements though its suitability to reveal perspectives other than those normally represented in the academic literature which tend to be high class and male in addition to deriving from a textual source is of more general application (cf. Geaves, 2007: 238).

Certainly our students, when asked in anonymous questionnaires, were able to articulate the advantages of day visits, many stressing the value of first-hand direct experience benefiting from encounter with believers themselves and, borrowing from an image used by a student, moving beyond a two-dimensional account. The impression conveyed is of the authenticity of the insider's account in contrast to the lecturer who is seen as an outsider. However, they also suggested some potential disadvantages where, counterpointing the insider's authenticity, is the notion of bias or selectivity where the outsider is deemed to be objective which makes any deviation from academic norms problematic. It is instructive that one student observed that time was too short to experience much at all, underlining the need for additional and extended experience.

To return to the main point, such responses may be controversial in terms of how we do Theology and Religious Studies? it is clearly one thing to be told that the Sikh holy book, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, is treated as a human Guru and another to see the bed where it is placed at night or again to be told about the many spiritualities found in Glastonbury and to see this on the ground. Admittedly, this is a comparatively safe and undemanding exposure to lived religion but even here students expressed some concerns and sensitivities. They were anxious about how to ask questions without giving offence and to observe the protocol and etiquette of the communities they were visiting yet students also had personal issues, for example, unwillingness to bow before the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and how to cope with feelings of antagonism stirred up by a speaker's comments.

Further feedback was given by students in reflective portfolios at the end of the module which included the visit to Glastonbury. Many comments affirmed the value of experiential learning: 'sitting in the Goddess temple is probably one of the best ways one can think of in which to 'feel' and understand the significance of Glastonbury'; however the experiences are not always positive when image and reality were seen to be at odds or when speakers expressed opinions with which students took issue. Others stressed how experiential learning brings surprises; 'the difference between Welsh and English Druids is astonishing'; 'what stayed in my mind was the commercialization? from Wiccan artefacts to Buddha images'. The impact could be personal 'I expected myself [as a non-believer in either Christianity or alternative spiritualities] to be rather indifferent, but it was the total opposite' going on to describe being 'awe-inspired' in the Goddess temple. Interestingly another found significance in the group experience 'being with my colleagues? was a transcendent experience ultimately'.

## **Fieldwork placements**

For purposes of the project, fieldwork placements are defined as intensive or sustained experience, often residential, in which students spend time in religious communities and employ ethnographic methods in their study. A number of departments in our survey used variations on the fieldwork placement.

At Bath Spa students undertake a compulsory one-week placement as part of the core course on studying religions in the contemporary world. The placements used include Buddhist monasteries of various traditions, Christian convents, new religious movements such as ISKCON or the Brahma Kumaris, the Salvation Army, alternative spiritualities in Glastonbury, and a local Gurdwara.

Students can choose their placement, with the proviso that it must not be a tradition that features either as their

current personal affiliation or that of their upbringing. The reason for this is to maximise the distance between the beliefs and values of the student and the host community and thus both the experience of Religious and Cultural Diversity, but also of being in a minority in this context. Placements are assessed by both oral/visual presentation and a research project that focuses on a particular theme or issue relevant to the host community and includes reflection on methodological and ethical questions. The value of fieldwork placements in which students act as ethnographers seems clear to us as the culmination of experiential elements within the undergraduate programme. The suitability of ethnography is evident in this description of the approach:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (Brewer, 2000: 10)

Fieldwork placements enable students to study religious people in their own communities, thereby to discover what religious people believe and practise by sharing, insofar as is possible, the life of their communities so as to gain the necessary information and insights to offer an authentic interpretation.

Writing in the 1970s, John Saliba (1974: 154-155) advocated an increased use of fieldwork in the study of religions, commenting favourably upon the possible contribution of ethnography in resisting the impulse to impose one's own views of religion and instead in seeking to discern the views of one's informants with openness and without distortion. (Interestingly, given the subject of this paper, Saliba (1974: 155) refers to an understanding of religion as 'simply a form of experiential knowledge' and thus concentrates on various modes of knowing, neither privileging the religious nor prejudging what is religious.) The 2010 OFSTED report on Religious Education in schools also recommends increased use of fieldwork.) Yet, still now, fieldwork is not a mainstream part of Religious Studies scholarship (Geaves, 2007: 249).

This is in spite of fieldwork's significance and benefits albeit combined with particular demands and difficulties. For example, as Geaves (2007: 238, 240, 243, 245, 248) explains, fieldwork offers another dimension, challenging stereotypes of religions and generalizations about them, and undermining essentialist notion of religions as unified and bounded. However, fieldwork requires interaction with other human beings and accordingly means that the fieldworker has to cope, not only with academic issues, but also with her/his personal responses to other worldviews, be they positive or negative, prompting reflection and critique (Geaves, 2007: 240-241). Moreover, the fieldworker's own beliefs may restrict the extent to which s/he can share in the life of the community and pose moral dilemmas about how to conduct oneself so as to remain true to one's own convictions while showing appropriate respect and courtesy to one's hosts (Geaves, 2007: 250-251). Indeed, fieldwork can be engaged as well as ethical in character. For Kim Knott (1995: 209-211), fieldwork is shaped by her feminism and is governed by principles that include '[a]ccountability and partnership'. Perhaps by its very nature, fieldwork promotes personal involvement with, alongside professional responsibility towards, informants.

Our students' thoughts on their fieldwork placements, that echo some of these points and contribute others, were gathered from focus group discussions with separate groups of second and third year students convened by a member of University staff outside the Humanities Department where Study of Religions is located. Students endorsed the fieldwork placement as part of a Religious Studies programme as a new and important form of learning, describing it as both vital and valuable. They emphasized that the placement was integral to a broad-based study of religion with its comparative dimension. One student observed that they had learned far more than they would have from lectures and books, and one commented on the improved grasp of theory and method that was a consequence of applying it for oneself. Among the features of the placement that were identified as particularly rewarding were the opportunity to see a religious community in its everyday life and to learn how to interact with people from different backgrounds. There was also recognition of the role of placements in students' personal and academic development.

Additionally, students' responses ranged across possible challenges. They alluded to 'culture shock' and the need to consider how to cope with this and to the balance between participation and observation in the light of the community's attitude. Where students were on placement with other students rather than individually, they noted that interpersonal dynamics could be problematic. They recommended keeping an open mind, acknowledging that the placement can lead to questioning one's own values. Further, they appreciated the merit of independence and self-management in the research setting where initiative and flexibility are useful while they showed awareness of issues of interpretation given doubt about how far their own experiences of a specific community were representative of the religion as a whole.

Some of the students' responses suggested possible areas of controversy. Students advised future students to remember that their role is not to change the community that they are researching. Yet is it possible to avoid the 'researcher effect' when students, either individually or in small groups, for a week or in successive weeks, often over a period of years and, in some cases, decades, live in the community, working and, to some extent at least, worshipping alongside its members? Hostility towards students was also raised where a student felt that s/he had been met with rudeness. Here too there are difficulties since the student is dependent on the community for her/his research and, though consent has to be given on behalf of the community, members may take a different view, especially as our students are, by definition, 'outsiders' who do not share the community's values. A clash of values can also occur where a student is confronted with beliefs and practices that are not only different from her/his own but opposed to them, for example, the perceived indoctrination of children. This may not happen frequently but, when it does, it places a student under great strain and not merely academically, at the same time as bringing into sharp focus tensions associated with a religiously and culturally plural society.

Finally, there are the unpredictable implications of participation in religious activities. A student may find such participation makes very little, if any, impact upon them yet it may be inspiring and uplifting or profoundly disturbing. The nature and motivation of participation from the perspective of the community that is committed to its spiritual life may contrast sharply with the perspective of the student for whom participation may be purely instrumental in purpose, whatever its subsequent outcomes and however the student may choose to deal with her/his own reactions. Recent examples of the experience veering into personal religious experience was a student finding learning to meditate of personal spiritual benefit, and perhaps more worryingly, the student who was so intensely involved with ritual practice that s/he experienced visualizations. Careful briefing gives students some resilience against such occurrences but the tutors do worry about the phone call that announces that the student is not returning either to university or their home having found their spiritual path more important than degree or family.

A survey of recent student projects reveals some new insights such as the ability to understand the role of the divine office in the life of an enclosed community, or of art iconography and ritual in Tibetan Buddhism. There are some surprises such as the business organization needed to run a concern such as Bath Abbey, or individual devotees with very different interpretations from the party line. There are occasions when the student had something approaching a religious experience, or found it hard to maintain an academic perspective when so involved in the life and worship of the community. Finally examples of clashes of values included more than one example where observations, research and interviews revealed gender inequalities in communities with a rhetoric of equality, and other examples where treatment of vulnerable people were queried.

## **Concluding observations**

The value of experiential elements, we would argue, is that cultural and religious diversity is experienced in the raw and at first hand. The plurality of beliefs and values both across and within traditions is underlined as are the complex interactions of the 'religious' and the 'cultural', often a topic of discussion within the communities themselves. The difficulty of negotiating the tensions between respect for the beliefs of others which one does not share, and holding firm and possibly speaking out about one's own beliefs and values becomes more than theoretical, and vague platitudes about tolerance are shown to be thin. Our desired outcome is that students learn to conduct an ongoing

dialogue that acknowledges difference and disagreement without fear and with respect.

As part of the Subject Centre-funded project that we have been undertaking, we have prepared a Skills Audit based upon the Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Statement (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007) and the Subject Centre Employability Guide (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, 2009). In this, we argue that experiential elements facilitate the development of a range of skills including those relevant to Cultural and Religious Diversity and thus to controversy arising out of conflicting beliefs and values.

From the Benchmarking Statement, we suggest the following skills, listed under '[d]iscipline specific and intellectual' and '[g]eneric' skills which we identified in all experiential elements (that is, the day visit, fieldwork placement, study visit abroad and vocational placement), are particularly pertinent (the wording has been revised for brevity):

**Representation of views other than one's own with fairness and integrity and express own identity without denigration of others.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that students require briefing, guidance and debriefing in order to equip them with the capability and confidence to achieve this.

**Awareness of the passion and claims to certainty in traditions, with their positive and negative effects.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that the value of meeting adherents is that students can gain an understanding of the meaning and implications of commitment.

**Engagement with the convictions and behaviours of others with empathy and integrity.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that this requires students to be prepared for the experience and encouraged to develop these attitudes.

From the Employability Guide, we suggest the following skills, listed under '[g]eneric competencies' and '[p]ersonal capabilities' which we identified in all experiential elements in the case of the first two skills and in placements, both fieldwork and vocational, in the case of the final three skills, are particularly pertinent:

**Interpersonal sensitivity**

In respect of this skill, we comment that a major strength of experiential elements is that students develop their awareness of different perspectives and both respect and learn from the views of others.

**Questioning**

In respect of this skill, we comment that students develop their capacity for appropriate questioning often across cultural and language barriers.

**Achievement orientation**

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements may enhance the ability to achieve the intended outcomes. We further comment that interaction with alternative worldviews and lifestyles may simultaneously offer a radical challenge to the hegemonic discourse associated with conventional notions of achievement.

## Adaptability and flexibility

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements involve students working in unfamiliar environments informed by religious beliefs and values that the student may or may not share.

## Tolerance of stress

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements may put individuals under pressure in a variety of ways, especially when living and working in a new setting. Our students' responses demonstrate the pertinence of most of these skills but also the complexity inherent in, though perhaps obscured by, their rather technical formulation given the reality of diversity on the ground and the resultant potential for controversy.

The next stage of the research includes continuing our series of host community interviews to investigate the experience from the point of view of the receiving communities. We will also develop a template for recording what the communities can offer to students, and visit partner universities to facilitate the sharing of good practice. We will develop the website to include case studies, good practice guides, sample documentation (e.g. policy guidelines) and ideas for curriculum and assessment. It would be useful to know what else university departments might find useful.

We are aware that we are developing our ideas in a climate where the future of Higher Education as a whole includes many uncertainties. On the one hand, subjects like Theology, Religious Studies and Philosophy may be under threat from being viewed as small or economically irrelevant. Experiential elements are costly both financially and in time and other resources. On the other hand, the Equality and Diversity agenda requires that authorities take account of religious and cultural diversity. The role of religions in the public sphere is being debated nationally, with some seeing the volunteering capacity of religious communities as a major resource in a political climate emphasising the downsizing of the state and the role of social enterprise and active citizens in the 'big society'. Research reveals that religious communities already contribute to social welfare?for example it has been estimated that in our small unitary authority of Bath and North East Somerset religious communities contribute community-based activity to the financial value of £3,600,000 per year (Bath and North-East Somerset Faith Forum, 2010:4). Concerned as we are about the political and social implications of such an instrumental approach to religious communities, we continue to argue for the importance of a religiously literate society and for experiential learning as one of the most effective means of developing the requisite inter-religious and intercultural skills in the citizens of the future.

## Bibliography

Bath and North East Somerset Faith Forum (2010) 'Faith Action Audit 2010'. [Online] available from: <http://www.bathchurches.org.uk/newsandcomment.htm> (accessed 5/7/10)

Bowman, M., 'Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Chakra of Planet Earth: The Local and the Global in Glastonbury' *Numen*, 52, (2005) pp. 157-190.

Bowman, M., 'Learning from Experience: The Value of Analysing Avalon' *Religion*, 39, (2009) pp. 161-168.

Brewer, J.D., *Ethnography* (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press 2000).

Connolly, P., 'Psychological Approaches' in: Connolly, P. (ed.) *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Cassell 1999) pp. 135-192.

Cush, D., 'Religion and Cultural Plurality in Education' in: Ward, S. (ed.) *A Student's Guide to Education Studies*. Second Edition. (London & New York: Routledge 2008) pp. 48-56.

Fitzgerald, T., 'Experience' in Braun, W. & McCutcheon, R.T. (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London & New

York: Cassell 2000) pp. 125-139.

Geaves, R., 'Baba Balaknath: An Exploration of Religious Identity.' *DISKUS*, 4 (2)(1996). [Online] available from: <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/geaves.html>.

Geaves, R., 'Fieldwork in the Study of Religion' in Chryssides, G.D. & Geaves, R., *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London & New York: Continuum 2007) pp. 238-274.

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, *Employability: Where Next? Unlocking the Potential of your Theology and Religious Studies Degree*. Second edition. (Leeds: Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies 2009).

Hulsether, M., 'Religion and Culture', in Hinnells, J.R., (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge 2005) pp. 489-508.

Knott, K., *Women Researching, Women Researched: Gender as an Issue in the Empirical Study of Religion* (Oxford & Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell 1995) pp. 199-218.

Lincoln, B., 'Culture' in Braun, W. & McCutcheon, R.T., (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Cassell 2000) pp. 409-422.

McGill, I. & Warner Weil, S., 'Continuing the Dialogue: New Possibilities for Experiential Learning' in Warner Weil, S. & McGill, I., (eds.) *Making Sense of Experiential Learning* (Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press 1989) pp. 245-274.

Merkur, D., 'Psychology of Religion' in Hinnells, J.R., (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge 2005) pp. 164-181.

Moon, J. A., *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (London & New York: RoutledgeFalmer 2004).

Narayanan, V., 'Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68 (4), (2000) pp. 761-779.

Nesbitt, E., *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches* (Brighton & Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press 2004).

Office for Standards in Education, *Transforming Religious Education* (London: Ofsted 2010).

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Statement* (London: Quality Assurance Agency 2007).

Saliba, J.A., 'The New Ethnography and the Study of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13 (2), (1974) pp. 145-159.

Smith, J.Z., *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1982). Weller, P., *Religious Diversity in the UK: Contours and Issues*, (London: Continuum 2008). Wuthrow, R. & Cadge, W., 'Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 (4), (2004) pp. 363-380.

Created on: May 27th 2011

Updated on: May 27th 2011