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Religious Studies and theology in the context of secular higher education: the problem of the 'methodological offer'

Gwilym Beckerlegge

I

Arguments about the relationship between theology and religious studies have been protracted. Their unresolved nature might reasonably prompt questions as to whether, instead of leading to a constructive reconfiguration of the study of religion, the terms of the debate have merely been continually re-couched in line with current cross-disciplinary and cultural preoccupations (1). Having their roots elsewhere, rather than within religious studies or theology, such preoccupations, cumulative or passing in their effects, tellingly have been imported into the study of religion (and sometimes slowly, Heelas, 2005:259).

This is not to deny that there have been significant methodological developments. Gender studies and feminist theory have transformed the study of religion. Debates about postmodernism and 'orientalism' have provided recent stimuli, and, of course, one could add to these examples. But it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are still wrestling with many of the same questions about the relationship between the study of religion and the practice, affirmation, or other expressions, of religion, and what form the academic study of religion should take in secular universities (cf. Cox, 2006:215). At the heart of the contemporary academic study of religion, as practised under the influence of European and North American intellectual traditions, remain profoundly contested questions about its nature and purpose, symbolised not least by the perpetuation of separate departments of religious studies and theology. Departments of religious studies have been described as existing in a state of virtual 'war' with schools of divinity in the United States (Ward, 2004: 25). Religious studies is itself riven by a gulf between 'religionists', those who insist that religion must be understood on its own terms (sometimes linked to a model of human beings as meaning makers and seekers), and those who insist on explanations founded on reductionism or naturalism (see, for example Flood, 1999:68ff. cf., Sharpe, 1975:292).

Our problems deepen, if we are persuaded by Donald Wiebe's research into presidential addresses over the last 30 years from the American Academy of Religion, held to be a bastion of what Wiebe refers to as a 'non-religious scholarly agenda'. He concludes that the 'message' of the Academy's official leaders is indistinguishable from that of comparable, presidential addresses delivered to the religiously orientated National Association of Biblical Instructors (cited in Wiebe, 2006:675). It would appear that scholars of religion, within theology and religious studies, have not simply adopted significantly different principles from which to work. In important instances, scholars who have identified themselves with the methodological traditions of religious studies, normally thought of as addressing a 'non-religious scholarly

agenda', appear to have their own implicit religious agendas. These may be shaped by ideas about religion in general, rather than by a commitment to a particular religion (although such a commitment may determine an understanding of 'religion in general'). This might be expressed in nothing more than a tacit assumption that human religious endeavour, and thus its study, is not without some higher purpose and meaning. To those familiar with major figures in the history and phenomenology of religions, such as Gerardus Van der Leeuw, William Brede Kristensen and Mircea Eliade, this will hardly come as a surprise, although, if Wiebe is correct, the pervasive presence of such tacit agendas in the institutional voice of the American Academy of Religion is still striking.

Postmodernist insights have encouraged re-examination of the basis for maintaining a rigid distinction between the realms of theology and religious studies, and of the claimed value-free stance of phenomenology, which has been so central to religious studies. A new level of 'critical self-reflexivity', according to Ursula King (for example, King, 2002:367), now enables the subject to reconsider its boundaries, methodological orientation, and objects of study. Gavin Flood (1999:223) has urged that the future of religious studies lies 'in its developing into a critical endeavour that is in dialogical relationship with its object, the most important boundary here being language...'. Flood (1999: 19f.) argues that academic theology and religious studies are two kinds of writing (discourse) about religion. They have different concerns, histories and presuppositions (Flood, 1999: 19f., 226). Flood (1999:222ff.) anticipates religious studies aligning itself more closely with critical, cultural theory, but nevertheless rejects scepticism regarding the enterprise of religious studies. Richard King (1999:55), who is also sympathetic to the reconstruction of religious studies as a form of cultural studies, identifies a major problem ensuing from the postmodernist challenge; namely, that, if all perspectives are relative and competing, then there would appear to be no basis on which to reduce, far less choose between, the gamut of confessional approaches to the study of religion. This, arguably, is another consequence of releasing 'the genie from the bottle' (to paraphrase Smith, 2003:7).

Long before the impact of postmodernist theory was fully felt, problems relating to category formation, reification and objectivism, and the claims of phenomenology had been recognised and aired within religious studies, albeit in a less theorised manner (2). We have yet to see whether postmodernist theoretical perspectives will enable us to do more than re-state or refine the nature of these rigidities. In encouraging religious studies to look again at its prospectus in relationship to both theology and its own cross-cultural applications, it is not apparent as yet that postmodernist arguments have done more than problematise again the relationship between theology and religious studies and the latter's reliance on the concept of 'religion'. Consequently, at the current juncture in the development of the study of religion, the need to continue to clarify the relationship between theology and religious studies as different discourses with distinct histories has in no way diminished (cf. Cox, 2006:216). It is not overly dramatic to suggest that what is at stake is the future of religious studies as an area independent of theology or cultural studies (for example, Cox, 2006:236; McCutcheon, 1995: 306).

II

The choices presented to relatively inexperienced students about to embark on a university degree by the competing siren calls of religious studies and theology are of greater complexity than those, say, between Classics and Classical Studies, Fine Art and Art History. It would be surprising, if students opting for any of those subjects did not know what they were undertaking. Could the same be said of intending students of religion? Perhaps this problem is more acute in the context of British higher education where largely state-funded university teaching of theology may, and does, take place alongside religious studies, unlike the separation between theology and religious studies in the 'American model', and the confessional, denominational theology of the 'German model' (Ford, 2005:66) (3). There is the further complication that the somewhat uneven quality in the provision of religious education in British schools may result in less clear links between secondary and higher education than might be the case in other subjects that span this divide. Moreover, a large proportion, if not the majority, of undergraduate students who now choose to take some branch of the study of religion at degree level do so as one of several subjects, and for many it is not their first subject. Consequently, their choice of university may not have been influenced primarily by the particular form of the study of religion on offer. Entry into a department of religious studies, theology, or theology and religious studies thus might be an almost accidental outcome of other more conscious decisions made by students, for example, relating to preferred combinations of subjects, or even of a requirement to find three or four subjects in a given year.

When considering the responsibilities of university departments for the induction of students into the study of religion, where fundamental methodological principles within this field are so vigorously contested, it is pertinent to consider to what extent and in what manner the distinctive claims of *both* theology and religious studies are heard and then tested by students. The methods and concerns of theology are more likely to be subjected to a critique than be put to use within religious studies. Similarly, the preoccupations of religious studies, not least with 'religion' and 'religions' (and the problems inherent in these categories), are unlikely to receive extended treatment within the environment of theology. In practice, of course, it is for the department to adopt a stance, which is a statement of its academic identity - religious studies or theology. It is a decision that is binding on its students, once they have accepted the department's 'methodological offer'. The difference in this respect between separate and joint departments of theology and of religious studies would depend on whether students in the latter are systematically introduced to the methodologies of *both* theology and religious studies and are encouraged to practise and evaluate them self-consciously. Where theology and religious studies are treated as two wings of a building in which only the singularly daring, and at their own risk, move between the two, this would seem little different from separate departments.

As the appropriate use of an accepted methodology is likely to be reflected in the marking criteria and ethos of a course, it is more accurate to describe students, who have accepted a department's methodological offer, as entering into a 'methodological contract'. Yet, in many cases, these students have still to acquire the knowledge necessary to understand the implications of this contract, particularly as many who opt to pursue the study of religion at university will not have taken it to a specialist level in school. It might be objected that students, irrespective of their discipline, generally tend to be inducted into methodology at a more theoretical level once embarked upon an undergraduate degree, and thus students of religion are no

different in this respect. The situation in the study of religion, however, is complicated by enduring, contested positions, the different histories of religious studies and theology and their institutionalisation within universities, and the different ways in which the relationship between theology and religious studies is currently perceived and presented.

III

For scholars of religion who follow their various crafts in British universities, how they might choose to define their methods and subjects, or what importance they might attach to the distinctive concerns and history of their methodological stance, matters little when government agencies impose the unified heading of TRS (Theology and Religious Studies) on their research and teaching. Some within the study of religion would argue that the boundary between theology and religious studies, in fact, has already softened considerably, if not begun to dissolve, through changes in both disciplines.

In a recent overview of theology and religious studies in Ireland and the UK, Ann Loades (2006:29f.) (President of the Society for the Study of Theology) wrote:

‘I assume nothing about what is meant by “theology” or “religious studies”, since nowadays it is essential to attend to the staffing and programmes of particular subject-groups/departments to see what is on offer under various headings. For instance, “religious studies” need not necessarily include “other” religious traditions any more than “theology” necessarily excludes new methods and resources or sources of reflection and critique, least of all the challenge of studying another major religious tradition.’

David Ford (2005:66f.) shares a similar view: ‘Departments in British universities are called variously theology, religious studies, theology and religious studies, and divinity. Whatever the name, most now embrace both theology and religious studies.’ Such claims would almost appear to suggest that the retention of the terms, theology and/or religious studies, is now little more than a reflection of the histories of different institutions, because the curricula and approaches adopted in departments, while still operating under these different designations, in practice have drawn closer together. In considering this perspective on the current relationship between what goes on under the headings of ‘theology’ and ‘religious studies’, however, we should not forget that Ford also acknowledges that joint departments of theology and religious studies are peculiar to British universities (the ‘British model’), the result in no small part of institutional mergers. This raises the question of whether this institutional co-existence is founded upon a methodological harmonisation of the interests and methods of the two disciplines or merely gives rise to a perception that this has taken place. Loades’ assertion, for example, that ““religious studies” need not necessarily include “*other*” religious traditions” [emphasis added] runs contrary to the determination to explore varied expressions of religions, which both provided the impetus behind the historical antecedents of this discipline and continues to provide a rationale and a motivation for the subject in its present form.

If we are to accept that the accounts of the current relationship between religious studies and theology given by Ford and Loades refer to a methodological shift, as distinct from an institutional arrangement, the nature of the new commonality, which has made this possible, needs to be made explicit (cf. Richard King, 1999:54). There may indeed be greater overlap in the content and even methods of particular courses in theology and religious studies. It is the differences, however, between these two academic routes, which contextualise any overlaps and thereby provide a more reliable indication of the significance of such overlaps within a degree pathway as a whole (4). This perhaps suggests that religious studies and theology are more like methods on different tracks, passing from time to time over the same sets of points, rather than methods with 'interweaving strands' at different points on the same spectrum (Ursula King, unpublished: 1).

IV

Before the department of which I am a member recognised that the label 'non-confessional' meant little to those not already involved in the discipline, this was how we presented our 'methodological offer'. The 6000 or so students per year, who have opted for the Open University's 'Introduction to the Humanities', consequently have encountered a justification for following a methodology identified with religious studies rather than theology. More recently, I have been involved in formulating a similar 'methodological offer' through the design of a religious studies course at University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland (5). This has taken place against a background of UCC's history of being one of Ireland's 'godless colleges', and near-universal Roman Catholic religious instruction in schools. The latter has only recently been broadened to some extent with the introduction of a new examinable component in religious education within the Irish school-leavers' certificate. Here again we meet the question of responsibility for the 'methodological offer'. Many future students at UCC, like their counterparts in Britain, will hardly be in a position to grasp the significance of an affiliation to religious studies as a methodology, given that such methodological choices do not form part of religious education in schools.

As the 'methodological offer', whether in theology, religious studies, or a combined department, in most cases is taken up by students in advance of fuller understanding of what it entails, it is perhaps hardly surprising that many students struggle to view theology and religious studies in terms of methodologies and frequently persist in seeing them as the extension of their personal attitudes to religion (6). It would be surprising to find, for example, that many students have made choices between theology and religious studies informed by an understanding of academic theology as a method of enquiry, which can be separated from holding to a particular religious position. This is what Brian Hebblethwaite (1980:3ff.) entertained when he asserted that an atheist could be a theologian, 'If he is prepared to enter sympathetically into the *possibility* that God exists'. The existence of God in relationship to humankind is to be treated as a hypothesis.

My acknowledgement of the problem inherent in my own stance as a teacher of religious studies is not the prelude to some kind of methodological recantation. An inability to resolve unequivocally methodological disagreements, which persist because they stem substantially from no less contested features inherent in this field

of study, might make for a measure of humility about the provisional quality to research in this area but should not lead to paralysis. Those working within religious studies are now more inclined to accept that their methodology offers another perspective within the study of religion, rather than an external, value-free vantage point in the way in which, I believe, Ninian Smart (1973:11) sought to promote the subject. The distinct concerns, institutional history, and approach of religious studies, however, offer significant ‘strategic’ benefits – political and scholarly – as an alternative route to theology. The existence of combined departments of theology and religious studies and claims of commonality (cf. Models 2 and 3 in King, 1999:53f.) neither signal the resolution of a long-standing methodological debate, nor do justice to the history of religious studies and the way in which its concerns are understood and pursued by many practitioners in universities in Britain and elsewhere. Central to this, is the manner in which practitioners within the scholarly traditions of theology and religious studies respectively handle the concept of ‘religion’ (7). The distinctive nature of reservations about this concept voiced in these two camps, I shall suggest, is indicative of more general, persisting differences between theology and religious studies.

V

The requirement that an academic theologian needs to be able to enter sympathetically into ‘the *possibility* that God exists’, may not sound that dissimilar to the empathy exercised by the phenomenologist. Hebblethwaite (1980:5) makes clear his position on the relationship between theology and the study of religions, however, when he declares that both believer and unbeliever, when confronting the anxiety generated by theology may

‘...be tempted to take refuge in the more secure sphere of the scientific study and the comparative study of religion. But both may find themselves admitting that truth will be less well served if they do so. The university (and the state), one hopes, will maintain faculties of theology, if they see in them the search for ultimate truth rigorously and responsibly pursued.’

The reference to a ‘more secure sphere’ hardly disguises Hebblethwaite’s misgivings about the shift of focus to ‘religion’ and a perceived methodological deficiency.

Keith Ward (2004:25, 37) stresses that ‘If Christianity is to be taught in secular universities, it must be taught as the ambiguous and disputed phenomenon it is...’. He argues ‘Nevertheless, it is still of great importance to try to understand what it is about religion that has attracted the total commitment of so many people...’ (Ward, 2004:25). While rejecting formation in the Christian faith as difficult to defend in a secular university, he retains the aim of seeking ‘...a deeper knowledge of what leads people to have Christian faith...and a deeper feeling for the very various sorts of experiences that religious believers have’ (p.26). His approach, in fact, veers between references to ‘religion’, ‘religions’, and Christian theology. He later expands on the notion of theology as ‘discourse about the gods’, stressing the importance to education of the

‘...discussion of the ultimate goals and values of individuals and societies, as a careful and critical examination of reasoned claims that there is a transcendent

spiritual reality, and that its nature has been disclosed at various points in human history...' (p.26).

This, however, begs questions of how central 'gods' are to 'religion' more generally, and whether notions of 'total commitment', 'transcendent spiritual reality', and moments of historical disclosure provide accurate grid references on a map intended for those travelling across the mysterious and varied terrain of 'religion'. Ward's claim that theology is best suited to provide the expertise 'to discover what religious faith really is', together with its functions and the challenges facing it, follows his definition that the 'core of a religion' is to be found in its authoritatively defined beliefs (p.36).

Ford (2005: 78), who, as we noted above, has spoken of an increasing integration of theology and religious studies, asserts that 'Within the university it is perhaps the theological commitment to wisdom that is most important and also most controversial.' Theological questioning and dialogue, he argues, have an important contribution to make to the intellectual life of universities. For Erik Borgman and Stephan Van Erp (unpublished: 2) theology is '...not a form of religious studies at all. Theology does not have religion as its object...Instead of religion, theology studies the whole of reality from the viewpoint of a religious adherence to God.' They go on to say that religions have to be studied as in religious studies, but '...theology's aim is to rationally articulate the presence of God or gods these traditions address, trying to reflect on how this presence addresses itself to people.'

In many ways, the statements above about the role of theology in British universities confirm descriptions of its expanding scope, which is no longer confined to the study of the Christian tradition. On the other hand, although theology is presented as providing entry into what many would regard as the broader category of 'religion', with all the variety of belief and practice this implies, the categories employed are drawn from a specifically theistic and revelatory model of religion. It is maintained that it is the particular and pre-eminent task of theology to explore what religious faith 'really is' and to examine claims about a transcendent spiritual reality or the quest for ultimate truth. It is this preoccupation that theologians, presumably, would emphasise when delineating the difference between what they do and what takes place in religious studies in courses on, for example, Christian or Jewish thought. Given acknowledgements of the disputed nature of religious claims and the need for theological enquiry to be undertaken in a critical manner, it is not entirely clear *how* theological method can fulfil this mission. Yet, we find it being argued that to do less than this would be to take up the approach of religious studies, which implicitly at least is regarded as inadequate, although able to serve the purposes of theology. It is here that we see continuing, significant difference between the scholarly discourses of theology and religious studies, which reflects their origins, histories and concerns. This is evident not least in the virtual lack of any recognition of the problematic nature of the concept of 'religion' itself. Ward (2004:35) does touch on this but asserts '...there is no doubt that we can pick out activities in almost every human society which bear a close analogy to what we know is religious activity...'.

If the scope of theology has broadened in recent decades, it is no less true that practitioners of religious studies have become far more cautious in making claims about the value-free character of the methodological position thought to have been afforded by phenomenology. In the course of such reflection, the concept of

'religion', which currently marks out the boundary of the field of religious studies, has occupied centre-stage. Long recognised as being difficult to define and liable to encourage reification and essentialism, the concept of religion has been the focus for extensive discussion of the problems of how to define it as a cross-cultural category. Attention to this problem has been an indicator of a properly critical approach to the subject, and provisional, functional definitions have appeared to offer a way forward in a situation in which it was widely recognised that no one definition was likely to win universal acceptance. In recent debate, however, the question of how to define 'religion' has been overtaken, not for the first time, by questions of whether it should be used at all, with all the methodological and political implications this would hold for the future of a discipline of religious studies. If, following Hebblethwaite, the existence of God in relationship to humankind may be referred to as a hypothesis to be examined critically by academic theologians, it might be said that testing the utility and validity of the concept of 'religion' as a means to categorise a distinctive pattern of human practice and belief – a necessary 'taxonomic tool' (McCutcheon, 1995:287) - has provided one of the problematics that has driven religious studies.

Many of the criticisms more recently levelled against the continuing use of 'religion' in studies of highly diverse beliefs and practices have emphasised that the term not only encourages the often unconscious privileging of European categories and assumptions but more specifically that it is rooted in the interaction between European Christianity and rationalism (for example, King, 1999:35ff.). What is significant about such arguments in the context of the current discussion is that these criticisms broadly from within religious studies of the concept of 'religion', and thus the religious studies enterprise built upon it, go beyond the recognition of the ethnocentric shadings of this key category. The continuing use of the concept is said to represent an alternative theological understanding of the world, with religion emerging as if *sui generis*. On this understanding, the study of religion '...is fundamentally a theological enterprise which has attempted to disguise itself as something akin to - though distinct from – a social science' (Fitzgerald, 2005:175). Accordingly, Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that religious studies should be replaced by the study of institutionalised values.

For others, such as James Cox (2006:237f.), the use of preliminary definitions of the field of religion, which are to be tested through research, and a focus on the response of communities to what they believe 'as a result of postulating alternate realities' provide a basis for an approach that is distinct from theology, neither essentialist nor decontextualised, and is scientific in that it is testable and capable of falsification. This is close to my own position, which is to adopt the category of 'religion', with its inherent problems, as something akin to a thesis to be tested, much in the nature of a research project (cf. McCutcheon cited in King, 1999: 60). Without a definitional framework, it is also difficult to envisage constructing generalisations that contribute to theory. There is undoubtedly a tension at this point as the twin spectres of essentialism and reification raise their heads. Also, a definition of religion may greatly affect subsequent explanatory theory (for example, Bruce, 1995: ix), and so the danger emphasised by Fitzgerald that the concept 'religion' may obscure and even misdirect research should certainly not be minimised. On the other hand, I have considerable sympathy for Steve Bruce's observation that definitions should not ignore 'broad contemporary common-sense reflection on the matter' (Bruce, 1995:ix). This is not to imply that a Western European 'common-sense reflection' should be

allowed uncritically to dictate the conceptual shape of religious studies. Yet, the interconnectedness commonly associated with features of 'religion', such as between text and ritual (cf. Flood, 1999:223), have parallels in many cultures, and one could add to this the historical interconnectedness of many of the traditions subsumed within the category of 'religion'. As has been observed, the concept of 'religion' has meaning for millions of people (for example, Flood 1999:48, 223), and more so beyond Europe over the last century or so. In cultures in which there are no direct semantic equivalents to 'religion', moreover, there is often evidence of long-standing awareness of senses of identity, and boundaries around different senses of identity, informed by what European scholarship might dub 'religion'. Also, there is a fluidity and dynamism about language, which invites the exploration of parallels between the modern use of 'religion' and reformulations such as that relating to *sanatana dharma* in nineteenth-century Hindu India (see Dalmia, 1998, 1999).

Hinduism is often taken as the 'hard case' when testing the usefulness of the category of 'religion' (for example, Flood, 1999:45f.), leading Fitzgerald (2006: 171) to conclude that it is 'ineffective' for the analysis of Hinduism. A switch from an organising focus on 'religion' to alternative categories such as 'culture', 'ritual', 'ideology' or 'worldview', however, would be to concepts no less shaped on the Western European intellectual anvil, some with their own political overtones. As Flood (1999: 48) concedes, the use of categories without rigid boundaries and indicative of degrees of family resemblance can be useful when considering the concept of 'Hinduism'. He notes, however, that such constructions raise the question of prototypicality. This, of course, is at the heart of the debate between those who, while acknowledging the Eurocentric and Christian-influenced origins of the term 'religion', would press for its continued refinement as a general taxonomic device, and those who would argue that the concept is indissolubly linked to Christianity – the prototypical 'religion'.

The critical examination of definitional and conceptual issues is both important and necessary, and it is an activity in which religious studies and its antecedents have been properly engaged, although not always with sufficient consistency and rigour, since their formation. This is likely to become more rather than less pressing, if the development of universal, technical vocabularies accelerates under the influences of globalisation. The ongoing and vigorous debate about the scope of the concept of 'religion' and its applicability, on this understanding, could thus be regarded as evidence of the fruitfulness of this line of research, rather than a reason for losing confidence in religious studies as an enterprise.

The thrust of the arguments of Fitzgerald, King and others has been to lead the study of human beliefs, practices and values away from reliance upon the study of 'religion', understood here as a vehicle for the expression of, if not a world theology, then very much a European rationalist, or post-Christian, way of viewing the world. On this basis, it is claimed that, through its use of this peculiarly European construction, religious studies has failed in its aspiration to distance itself from a theological framework. Those within religious studies who have expressed scepticism about its methodological foundations have done so because they judge that religious studies has remained in thrall to Christian assumptions shaped by the European encounter with rationalism and pluralism. This is surely highly significant in the context of our discussion of current relationships between theology and religious

studies, indicating as it does a continuing critique of the relationship between religious studies and Christian theology.

VI

In spite of changes in the scope of both academic theology and religious studies, including a greater modesty about the scope of their respective methodologies, they remain preoccupied with different sets of problematics, which are likely to remain contested because of the nature of the beliefs and practices that theology and religious studies have set out to examine. As this chapter has argued, religious studies and theology are distinct disciplines, or discourses, with their own histories, concerns and approaches. It would be certainly premature, if not potentially misleading, to conclude, largely on the basis of the organisation of these subjects in British higher education and a greater measure of overlap in their curricula, that the fundamental differences in the approaches and content of religious studies and theology have been resolved. Perhaps as the methodologies of both disciplines continue to evolve in the setting of secular higher education, and in an intellectual milieu in which the dominance of Christian theological positions and the assumptions of scholarly methodologies rooted in the European intellectual tradition no longer go unchallenged, a greater degree of significant commonality may become apparent. In the meantime, it must surely remain a priority for those working in university departments of theology and religious studies to ensure that *distinctive* methodological principles of these different approaches are communicated effectively, not least to those with the power to determine the future course of university education, and ultimately so that future students may better appreciate the nature of the ‘methodological offer’ made to them respectively by departments of religious studies, theology, and theology and religious studies.

Notes

1. I shall use ‘study of religion’ to refer to the scholarly study of religious belief and practice in an all-embracing sense, including theology and religious studies. The designation ‘religious studies’ is also used in a comprehensive sense to include ‘religious studies’, ‘religion’, and ‘study of religions’.
2. See, for example, the evaluation of phenomenological method in Heelas (1978). See also Heelas (2005: 270ff).
3. For this reason, some of this chapter relates closely to the particular forms that the study of religion has taken in British universities.
4. See, for example, the account of the structure of the theology degree at the University of Oxford given by John Davies (2005) in the University magazine. This highlights that the Faculty is now ‘far more ecumenical’ and that ‘reading theology at Oxford can mean studying Jewish, Islamic or Hindu theology’. The ‘third track’ or ‘study of religions’ track offered by the degree, however, remains within an envelope of Christian biblical, theological and doctrinal studies.
5. See Beckerlegge, 2006, on this course development.
6. It was revealing that the small number of students, who attended the seminar where this paper was given, held that more religious (Christian) students opted for theology, while those with less defined, or no, religious convictions, veered towards religious studies.

7. A full discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of this chapter, which is limited to illustrating, what I believe, are representative examples of different preoccupations of theology and religious studies.

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