

Theology and/or Religious Studies? A Response from Graduate Students

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1. Introduction

There is a dynamic debate surrounding the academic study of theology and/or religious studies, to which graduates from ten universities have now contributed, through this project. By questioning course options, the reasons for choosing particular courses and the relationship between faith and academic pursuits, these graduates have provided an interesting insight into how and why certain students chose theology and/or religious studies.

For the purposes of this project, we employed two surveying techniques: an Internet based survey and localised peer

discussion groups. The main areas under discussion were the presumptions made about theology and religious studies, and what students understand about the relationship between these subjects. It is hoped that this survey will provide some insights into how the teaching of these subjects has affected student opinion and thus inspire similar surveys to be conducted by students in the future.

A variety of universities took part in the Internet survey, which provided us with a wide range of useful responses. The peer discussion groups took place at four universities: Oxford, Edinburgh, Leeds and Liverpool Hope. At these universities, graduate students were given the opportunity to discuss the issues in more detail, which provided us with some excellent insights into the central debates.

2. Online Survey

One hundred and thirty graduate students responded to the online survey after details were sent twice to eleven universities (see Appendix 1). The majority were one-year Masters students or in the early stages of their PhD, which was good for the purposes of the survey since they were likely to have more teaching and interaction with lecturers than other students. Although the sample size was small, and by no means representative of all graduate students studying theology or RS, the majority of respondents produced detailed responses, which were useful for the purposes of this survey. We picked a range of older and newer universities, to get a broad range of views.

The survey itself was sent twice: initially during exam time and again in the winter term. Although we received more response from our initial survey request (during exam time we received 95 responses), the range of answers was sufficiently varied to provide an interesting insight into the debate. The initial survey, conducted at the end of the academic year, aimed to collate data from graduate students who had already settled into their studies, and therefore able to reflect back on their initial assumptions on their choice of subject. The second survey, conducted at the beginning of the academic year, was primarily intended for students who had just begun their studies and thus would have a fresh view on their course selection. However, this may have led to the reduced number of respondents because students could not easily reflect on their current studies.

In designing the survey we sought to reach a balance between making it long enough to sufficiently cover the issues, without making it so long that people were put off completing it. Consequently we included many open-ended questions, which we were pleased to find most students did complete, perhaps showing a general interest in the topic. As an online survey, students were more likely to fill it in if they had easy access to the Internet.

We also deliberately chose not to provide definitions of 'theology' or 'religious studies' or even 'religion' in a broader sense, so that students could interpret these words in their own way. Few students noticed our lack of definitions, but those who did, made some pertinent comments. For example:

It seems to me that a large part of the problem lies with base definitions: 'theology' is usually (probably unconsciously) defined strictly as Christian theology and not applied to other religions such as Judaism, Islam or the many Hindu religions?let alone Wicca, Asatru or some of the 'new' religions. Then again, what is a 'religion'? Many people I know define 'religion' as an organised structure with a hierarchy, a formal liturgy, etc. I define 'religion' simply as a belief system. So we're talking about different things from the start. (Bristol University, PhD student)

2 (a) Respondents

The male/female ratio of respondents was almost equal, but approximately half of all respondents described themselves as theologians. 20.6% described themselves as studying RS, 16% as studying both theology and RS, and 16.8% categorised their course as 'other'.¹ This most likely reflects the fact that the majority of respondents were from universities which are more theology-oriented than RS-oriented. Due to the wide range of topics and subjects

available to students, it was also felt necessary to specifically ask for the title of course.

2. (b) The relationship between faith and study

Having established some basic information about our respondents, we first considered the theory that the basic difference between theology and RS is a matter of faith: namely, that theology is an 'insider-oriented' study, whilst RS requires the student to set aside her faith position and take more of an 'outsider' stance. Consequently, we asked respondents what motivated them to study their course, before investigating the relationship of faith and studies in more depth. We found that 10.5% of those who categorised their courses as RS gave faith as one of their motivations to study, whilst 60% of those studying theology did and 40% of those who describe their subject as 'both'.

To say that one's faith is important to one's studies is clearly ambiguous and may mean a number of things, so we asked students to briefly provide details about their faith. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the theologians were almost exclusively Christian (from a range of denominations), although there were also some agnostics, two Hindus and a 'spiritualist'. One student added that they interpreted their 'Quakerism as a life philosophy'. RS students tended to have a much wider span of beliefs, with about half calling themselves agnostic. There were some Christians, a few atheists and others categorised themselves as spiritualist, pagan/new age, one Buddhist and one Sikh.

The question of whether their faith was influenced by their studies provoked a range of responses, which varied from weakening it, to 'not at all', to 'deepening and nurturing' their faith. One respondent even reported having been led from being an adamant atheist towards agnosticism, 'allowing for the possibility of the unknown to exist'. Some stated that their studies lead to a more ambiguous personal faith, whilst others reported a better ability in articulating their faith as a result of their studies. One RS student commented that it was important for them to stay as impartial as possible and thus did not follow any particular faith for fear of its influence in their work. Another questioned the meaning of the word 'faith' and commented that without a definition, it was difficult to answer the question accurately.

2. (c) Opinions on the relationship between theology and RS

The survey then asked more direct questions about the student's personal opinions concerning the subjects themselves. As much as possible, we tried to ask the student to comment, giving the option for open-ended sentences. Our starter sentences beginning, 'I would NOT study X or Y because ...' were intentionally provocative, but actually led to more rounded answers. There was a noticeable diversion of opinion over what theology and RS actually were, and the differences and similarities between the subjects.

28.3% stated that theology was God-centred, 17% claimed that it was Christian based, and 15% stated that it was the study of a specific set of beliefs from one religion, typically Christianity. Interestingly two students said that it was the study of the human experience of the world and another said that theology simply justified a particular faith system, specifically Christianity. Other opinions included the study of one's own faith (7%), and the study of doctrine (6%). 5% said that it was the study of Judeo-Christian thought; only 1 person said that it was Judeo-Christian-Islam, and 5% said that one could study the theology of any religion.

Theology is not necessarily the study of a particular religion to which the academic believes in or belongs to. However, theology presumes a confessional belongingness to a certain faith, which an understanding of this particular faith or any other faith 'filters' through. (Edinburgh University PhD student)

Opinions about RS were much more varied and ranged from one student declaring that the subject was 'confusing'; to another stating that it is 'the study of particular beliefs, practices and cultural traditions and surrounding philosophy that has been categorised as part of a 'religion'. 28.3% stated that it was the study of multiple religions, perhaps in a comparative manner, and 16% claimed that it was the (alleged) attempt to study religion(s) from an objective or

impartial viewpoint. 11.3% argued that it was not really a subject in its own right, but a subject where one could learn about many different approaches, including anthropology, history and sociology. One student thought 'it looks good fun,', whilst another commented:

[RS is] the study of those beliefs and the circumstances that bring about those [religious] beliefs that motivate individuals and groups as far as their ritual, devotional, social and political actions are concerned. The study of religion ... is essentially the study of humanity both in historical and contemporary contexts. (Lancaster University Masters student)

Generally students claimed that theology and RS complement each other and are closely related. 69% of respondents thought that the disciplines 'can and should' co-exist in academic institutions, whilst only 5 people stated that they should be kept completely separate. One student went as far as saying that they could co-exist in the university but that they should have separate centres, tutors and lectures. Taking a more moderate stance, 25.7% of the students surveyed agreed with the statement 'they are compatible but in a very limited capacity'.

This section of the survey also included statements concerning the dependence of one discipline upon the other. Of the few who affirmed that 'theology can live without religious studies, but not vice versa,' most were (predictably) theology students, however some religious studies students also agreed. This may very well be an acknowledgement that, historically, theology pre-existed religious studies and is still capable of existing as an independent course of study. Theology was said by one student to be 'a worthy specialisation', whilst another said that 'RS without theology soon becomes dry and misses the 'insider' perspective'.

Those who thought more positively about RS stated that it provides 'a service' which theology could not?namely, that one could study many religions. Another said that there is an academic 'snobbery' against RS, so:

more and more contemporary scholarship ... [which is] labelled 'theology' is becoming very much influenced by RS and the approaches that are taken in RS.' (Edinburgh University PhD student)

Next the survey questioned the basic structuring of a faculty or department. The three options were that theology and religious studies should be taught together, separately, or together 'when appropriate'. A slight majority of respondents agreed that a department should combine theology and religious studies when appropriate. The two remaining options were fairly evenly divided. However, most of those who said they should be taught separately were theology students, whereas those who thought that theology and religious studies faculties should be combined were mostly religious studies students. Although, interestingly, one theology respondent questioned the purpose of a purely Christianity-focused theology department:

should universities reserve a place for the study of a particular faith when that place now seems less justified given the dwindling numbers of Christians in the West?' (Oxford University PhD student)

Students were also asked about whether courses should teach theology and religious studies together, separately, or separately 'with overlaps mentioned when useful or appropriate.' A sizeable majority (62%) accepted the latter option. Few theology students thought that the two disciplines should be taught in a joint course, but even fewer students (4%) thought that theology and religious studies should be taught totally separately.

The most popular response (65%) to this question was that 'differences in methodology/approach should be made clearer.' This affirmation may suggest a need for such explanation prior to any attempt to define or to draw a

distinction between theology and religious studies. Indeed, the students' response to another question confirms such speculation: surprisingly, given the apparent interest and the strength of opinion on issues in this topic, 43% of respondents (both theology and RS students) declared that their lecturers/tutors 'have not discussed the relationship'. Fewer students said that their lecturers/tutors portray theology and religious studies as 'different but not incompatible' (33%), and even fewer said that faculty members had recommended scholars from both theology and religious studies (a large number of these responses came from RS students).

3. Peer Discussion Groups

Discussion groups were organised at four universities: Edinburgh, Liverpool Hope, Oxford and Leeds. These groups were led by research assistants who were students at the universities, to maximize the 'insider' viewpoint. To encourage discussion, the research assistants were also given the freedom to conduct the survey as they saw suitable for their university. Since each university teaches theology and religious studies in different ways, it was felt that the student liaison would have the greatest insight into the methods employed at their respective universities. Some basic pointers and ideas were provided to each researcher, but it was ultimately left to them to utilise these materials, Internet questions and additional research, to achieve the best results from their peers. The researchers then wrote their own sections for the purposes of this report, which are reproduced below with minimal editing.

3. (a) Edinburgh Discussion Group, facilitated by Timothy Bridges

The Edinburgh discussion group consisted of four postgraduate students, three in the field of religious studies (RS) and one in the field of Church history/historical theology. To set the tone of the discussion the facilitator read from the course descriptions of each discipline from the University Catalogue:

Religious studies

Research in religious studies at the University of Edinburgh is non-confessional. It is conducted from the viewpoint that the category 'religion' corresponds to human activities influencing and being influenced by other human beliefs and practices. Students from various religious traditions or none are welcome, in keeping with the ethos of the School of Divinity.

Theological studies

... this subject area comprehends a broad range of themes in Christian theology and ethics. These include the traditional fields of practical theology, ethics, doctrine, historical and philosophical theology. In seeking to inter-relate these areas of study, the subject area stresses the connectedness of belief, practice and context.

Section 1: Agree or disagree? (and why)

The purpose of this section was to initiate discussion and to provide the participants with six strongly worded statements with which they could either agree or disagree. These statements were simply random paraphrased samplings of prevalent ideas from the field of RS and theological studies (TS). They were intentionally worded in such a way to promote a robust response.

1) Religious studies should have no greater connection to theology than to anthropology or sociology.

There was wide agreement to this statement. Some of the participants granted that there is a traditional association between RS and TS, but that such a close relationship was not necessary or even valid.

2) There should be a strict wall of division between the disciplines of theology and religious studies.

When the idea of separation was worded in absolute terms such as this, there was qualified disagreement. Three students believed that putting this kind of absolute barrier between the two disciplines was unnecessary and

unrealistic. The fourth participant, a RS student, suggested that such a barrier is necessary because 'theology creates meaning' to such a degree that the aims of RS may be jeopardized without that barrier.

3) *The study of religion is not a religious act.*

When faced with this question the first response from a RS student was 'it is not a religious act; it is an academic act.' At that point the discussion became more philosophical in tone as the nature of a 'religious act' was examined. There was a suggestion that even an academic act could be considered a religious act. This brought up issues of 'advocacy of religion.' One RS student argued that because RS does not engage in advocacy, then the study of religion is not the same kind of religious act as would be done by a religious adherent.

4) *The study of theology is not a religious act.*

To keep the discussion balanced, the same statement was made about theology, with similar discussion.

5) *'Truth' is more of a concern for theological studies than for religious studies.*

This statement gave rise to the distinction between 'truth', 'Truth' and 'truths.' One RS participant commented that, 'I have many true statements in my dissertation, but many of them do not agree with one another.'

6) *'Religious studies' is never concerned with advocating religion while 'theological Studies' is only concerned with advocating religion.*

The general response to this question was that RS 'should' not be concerned with advocating religion, but it often is construed that way. This gave rise to the question of 'belief' in the study of theology and religion. It was asked if 'belief' was a necessary component of TS. One RS student commented that 'there are areas of theology that RS cannot access.'

Section 2: Motivation for study

Section two was an attempt to discern the various kinds of motivations for entering the fields of RS and TS.

1) *What led you to choose your particular field of study?*

All of the participants responded in regard to their own personal curiosity in the subject matter. The TS student said that the ultimate motivation was the desire to prepare ministers in his future employment as a seminary professor. A RS student said that the breadth of the potential areas of study made him think he would not 'get bored' with the subject. This student also expressed a strong personal desire to study how people behaved in regard to religion.

2) *In general, in your discipline, do colleagues have a personal commitment to a particular religion/faith?*

The RS students commented that there is certainly a 'range within our department.' The TS student agreed that there was certainly a range of 'commitment' among those in the realm of theology. When asked if a commitment to a particular faith/religion was frowned upon in the broader realm of RS, the RS students replied, 'It may be looked at with suspicion,' and 'it is seen as potentially a danger.' Another RS student said that most people in RS have a 'secular faith' that is accepted.

3) *Who will potentially benefit from your work?*

This question was designed to examine motivation for study in terms of 'benefit' or the 'greater good.' The TS student said that any pursuit of truth would benefit humanity at large because 'all truth is God's truth.' One RS student understood their work to be primarily a benefit to the discipline of RS. Another RS student stated that his mental posture in regard to this question was 'benefit to society.'

Section 3: Fulfillment in study (Did it provide what you were seeking?)

After investigating the preexisting motivations for study, the discussion then turned to what the student perceived as 'being fulfilled' in their chosen field of study.

1) What is your level of satisfaction in your field of study relative to your motivations for entering it? Put another way, did it deliver what you were hoping for?

The first response came from a RS student who said that the experience has been 'satisfactory but frustrating' because there is a great tendency for one's study to be just a rehashing of old debates. All participants entered their field with hopes of making a real contribution, but fight against the temptation to merely become absorbed in existing categories. However, in general, the participants felt satisfied in their field of study and maintain academic stimulation in their research.

2) If you feel comfortable, share how your particular area of study has strengthened/hindered your commitment to a faith or religion.

'That is very complex,' was the first response from a RS student. Another student stated: 'I would say that I do not have a particular religion or spirituality... [at this point]. I certainly have an appreciation for the spiritualities of the people I am engaged with in my studies.'

Section 4: Relationship between the disciplines

The final section drew from the previous hour of discussion to investigate more thoroughly the relationship between the two disciplines.

1) Why do you suppose the RS department is housed in the School of Divinity?

At first the students attempted to answer this question in terms of historical development which was not the precise aim of the question. Thus, the question was changed to 'Do you think it is appropriate for the two disciplines to be housed in one building/department? An RS student suggested that it would be better served in a 'Cultural Studies' department (if that existed). A TS student said that there seems to be a peaceful co-existence between the two disciplines and that separation is unnecessary.

2) What potential hindrance could one discipline could be to the other?

The general consensus was that if one discipline were placed in a position of exerting power over the other, this would obviously be a hindrance to the discipline.

3) What potential benefit could one discipline be to the other?

There was a belief that the two disciplines could work together to engage in public debate and actively promote understanding.

4) If you were forced to combine the two disciplines into one course, how would you do it?

The final question centered on the hypothetical merging of the two disciplines. The participants asserted that such a combination would lead to the detriment of the two disciplines. 'Too much would be lost' said one RS student. Another RS student stated that there could certainly be a course where problems within different theologies are examined from a RS point of view.

Conclusion

After a vigorous discussion several patterns emerged. First, within the realm of religious studies there is a commitment to objectivity over and above advocacy of a religion. While it was admitted that it is possible to study theology without advocating it, the nature of theology many times suggests this advocacy. Second, RS students were generally more motivated by academic issues or personal interest than by a personal spiritual experience. Third, there was a belief among RS students that a strong connection to a particular faith would be a potentially detrimental factor in the study of RS.

3. (b) Liverpool Hope Discussion Group, facilitated by Alan Smith

Focus groups

Two focus groups were arranged at Liverpool Hope University, with 5 postgraduate students invited to join the coordinator at each group. All these students could be described as mature students: that is aged between 35 and 60.

Summary of discussions

Both groups discussed the difficulties with defining 'theology' and 'religious studies' (RS) and concluded that the 'philosophy of religion' could be used as a tool for critiquing both theology & RS. There was a general consensus that both disciplines could benefit, if they were studied together, but students also recognised that specialisation would enable greater in-depth understanding.

Almost all students were happy with the manner in which their lecturers/tutors related the two disciplines; although it appears that emerging understanding rather than direct explanation is what takes place in practice. The value of lecturers/tutors with both academic and practical understanding of the faith/religion and who thereby communicate both aspects of their subject is felt to be of more value than providing explanations.

Details of findings

Each group began with a discussion of the terms?both groups chose to identify theology with the nature of god(s) or of the divine in a faith tradition, and RS with the experience of the phenomenon of religion and the implications of these experiences for society. Some students considered RS as a general subject area embracing theology; i.e. theology could be considered a more in-depth focused subset of RS, embracing the implications and interpretation of doctrines in practice.

Both groups considered theology from the viewpoint of 'faith seeking understanding', with one group concluding that this implied that the atheist would only (at best) achieve a limited academic understanding of the subject. However, the atheist would be unable to fully understand religion, because they denied the reality of that which was being studied. The other group felt that this viewpoint was outdated and that atheists bring new and valuable perspectives to the subject.

It was generally felt that philosophy provided a helpful means of critiquing and challenging the assumptions of theology & RS through trusted academic methods of analysis, questioning and critical reasoning. It was generally felt by both groups that since theology is a subset of RS that it is vital that students of theology do study, and will benefit from a study of, RS. Typical comments were: 'RS adds beauty' and enables the student to 'better understand their theology'; 'they are complementary subjects' with 'theology being more theoretically based and RS more practically based'; 'theology cannot be done in the abstract but must be done with a knowledge of religious doctrines.'

It was felt by some students that RS students who understand the reality of religious experience are better equipped to understand theology. To a degree, one could argue that it is not possible to study theology without a practical experience of religion(s). Some students argued that although on the surface the two subject areas can and must be studied together, there are also implications that must be considered regarding the amount of time available to the student and the depth to which combined studies can go. Thus, in order to become more focused within an academic discipline the two subjects will at some point become separated.

It was the experience of most students that their tutors provided an acceptable level of understanding of the relationship between the two subject areas. One student from Nigeria described this as an evolving experience, starting with RS in the home and moving through early primary school and into high school where the doctrines of religion were inculcated. Then on entering university and/or seminary, he became more focused on theology as a subject which critiqued and interpreted the meaning and value of the doctrines. One student said this 'challenged our beliefs and our understanding of our religion.' Another said, 'RS leads to theology as you engage with the issues.' Another student, who is now in his 4th year of PhD research at Liverpool Hope, thought the distinction between theology and RS

unnecessary.

Although there was some discussion about how tutors should discuss the relationship between theology & RS, this was not felt to be the central issue?of more concern was the availability of lecturers and tutors in the field of theology & RS, who could speak as practitioners, rather than observers, of the tradition they represented. This was felt important because the lecturer/tutor would then have both the specialisation and practical understanding to communicate both its RS value and its theological value.

3. (c) Oxford University Discussion Group, facilitated by Jacob Waldenmaier

The discussion between 6 postgraduate students at the University of Oxford focused on insider/outsider issues in religious studies and theology. The group reached a compromised position that there are some facets of religion that can indeed only be understood by insiders, but also others which outsiders could understand quite as well. It was uncertain how this agreement would influence the structure of a department of theology or religious studies, particularly concerning whether the outsider or insider alignment should be emphasised or privileged. The discussion seemed to demonstrate that the insider/outsider dilemma is the core issue beneath the 'theology and religious studies or theology vs. religious studies' questions.

Discussion: the insider/outsider dilemma in academic study

The group began with discussing the aspiration of outsiders to understand religions, with one student commenting that such attempts are inevitably hampered by the unbridgeable phenomenological empathetic gap in knowing, for example, 'what it is to think and be a Christian'. Concerning this, he noted that he had read ostensibly 'scholarly' material on some aspects of Christianity that was highly incorrect or misguided. Another student acknowledged this, adding that she considered it arrogant that a particular Buddhist believed he understood Buddhism better than Buddhists. She affirmed that 'there are many questions one can ask about religion that can be properly answered without adopting the religion.'

The discussion then moved onto a definition of theology as 'the study of God'. Students commented that this definition inherently assumes that the object of the study is there to be studied. However, one commented that it is possible for outsiders to comprehend insider thought by looking solely on the human side of, for example, a theological treatise. Thus theology that constructively attempts to answer questions about God cannot be performed by outsiders, and such a discipline must be allowed to function on its own terms.

One student affirmed that 'the depth of religious studies comes from the lives of those committed to the religions'?thus suggesting a dependence of religious studies upon insider theology. This heavily prioritises the insider perspective for scholars of religion.

Discussion: the field of 'religious studies'

On the issue of religious studies as a discipline, one student expressed concern over its vague objectives and undefined topic. It is 'interdisciplinary,' and so may easily lack direction?or perhaps lose it in the process of research. Another found comparative religion to be somewhat superficial and topical. However an RS student responded,

The comparative perspective is more relevant in this world; more people are interested [because] ... comparative religion helps them understand what is going on in the world.

While it was established that theology is crucial for religious studies, another student added that religious studies is also quite important for theologians; for British Christians living in a multicultural nation like the UK, it is incumbent on them to know something about Islam and Hinduism. But the theologian is under no obligation to accommodate or incorporate those perspectives into his own framework. Atheologian might even learn about other religions for

theological motives like social responsibility and missions. A theologian, like anyone else, will inevitably understand other religions in light of her own perspective.

A theology student added that one can be fairly accurate in one's view, though he cannot be perfectly neutral. Many scholars have clear ideological assumptions prior to doing religious studies; outsiders are not any more neutral than insiders. A RS student remarked, 'it is noble to strive for [objective understanding]; otherwise, why be in academia? However we should never think that we have a perfect conception of [a religion].' This seemed a summary consensus among the group on the question of understanding in religious studies.

Discussion: the insider/outsider dilemma in departmental and faculty objectives

With respect to the integration of theology and religious studies, one student observed that we seem to be moving toward labeling things in these terms, which is surprising since defining the subjects themselves is virtually impossible. With respect to RS, he questioned why religious studies departments show many kinds of religious iconography together, as if suggesting that all the religions are working together toward some goal together. This assembly of religions often becomes actualized as a pluralistic theology masquerading as a religious studies program. Hence, he questioned the value of these labels, and whether they suggest that we're doing something purely for the sake of society. He argued that while it is entirely appropriate to understand each other for the sake of society, theology should be allowed to operate on its own terms and within its own system.

Building on his premise that outsiders are incapable of fully understanding a religion, this student's ideal successful religious studies department would reflect insider privilege. It would consist of 'lots of theologians talking to each other ... because they know what their religions are.' Religious studies departments should aim for the highest expression of their religions rather than the lowest common denominator and thus include thoughtful insider thinkers who are very much aware of alternative views, without feeling obligated to water down their own. It is irresponsible to reduce all religions down, for example, to ethical codes. There are many different spheres, and they connect at various points, but they are not reducible in the way that pluralists hope.

An RS student commented on the theologian's dismay that religious studies tends to force neutrality and unity among religions: she stated that there is magnificent diversity, and we should feel inspired to explore that diversity ? which can be done through many religious studies courses. Another student responded that this is actually where religious studies is enormously helpful; it actually prevents us from oversimplifying and from thinking in terms of 'big blocks,' because it gives students the opportunity to study, and thus appreciate, more than one religion.

As the discussion progressed, some interesting comments were made: one student stated that insider thinking should be intensified, by focusing more on truth rather than belief. In response, an RS student commented that it is not our responsibility to determine truth or falsehood, but to offer arguments without being dogmatic (for example acceptance of the Trinity should include critical thinking).

Interpretation and elaboration: insider-outsider theory

The group discussion seemed to suggest that the kind of information (and perhaps the kind of 'truth') sought in the study of religions is quite different from the kind sought in theology.

What may be at the root of this difficulty is the concept of 'religion.' Calling something 'religious' or associating something with a 'religion' tends to locate it in a special, unique, and often distant field of inquiry, and thereby can prevent it from making contact with the thoughts of someone who happens to be an outsider to that belief system. It presumes a sharp distinction between insider and outsider, and tends to look at religions reductively.

Alternatively, some phenomenological approaches often fight distance by attempting to 'believe in order to understand,' thereby inviting many religious ideas into their own faith paradigm and softening the distinction between outsider and insider. The result of this is very regularly a kind of theological pluralism.

The discussion concluded that if we desire an amicable relationship between theology and religious studies, thoughtful insiders are essential elements of theology and religious studies faculties; they are most capable of recognising differences and similarities between their systems and others, yet they are not expected to compromise their insider status by softening the systematic integrity of their own views.

Although we worked with the presumption that theology entails the (insider) attempt to study the (assumedly) existing God, the association of theology as study conducted by the 'insider' is not exclusive; there are also theologians who are outsiders, and scholars of religion who are insiders. Atheists are even insiders to their own perspectives, since they are as vulnerable to scrutiny by outsiders as are insider theologians. It seems then that everybody is inescapably both insider to some and outsider to others. Every studied philosophical system espoused by anyone, including atheistic philosophy, is an insider position. No view is exempt from insider status.

Departmental arrangements

There was a clear preference for insider privilege in this discussion among all involved. However this was not met without difficulty; it is a challenge for religious studies and theology departments to be inclusive without making an unspoken but nonetheless conspicuous truth claim like those associated with theological pluralism. This might suggest that departments of theology and religious studies should be separate, despite George Pattison's assertion that religious studies *needs* theology? otherwise, it dissolves into all the other disciplines.

The recurring problems with the concept of 'religion' and, accordingly, a discipline called 'religious studies' or 'study of religions' entails that religious studies should indeed dissolve into the other disciplines. One possibility could be for the department covering theology and religious studies to be absorbed into another department such as philosophy or a 'Department of Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies/Humanities' rather than 'religious studies.'

An 'Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies' department would honour the insiders' privilege to define themselves and acknowledges that fact that scholar's should not label people or label a person's belief system as a 'religion'. For example, Buddhists often do not think of Buddhism as 'a religion,' and there are many devout Christians who deny that what they believe and do is 'religious;' for some of them, 'Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship with God.' Scholars cannot claim the authority to label people; we owe those whose beliefs and practices we study this dignity of self-identification. Perhaps 'religion' is a contrived, Western label that contemporary scholarship should abandon, rather than utilise incorrectly.

3. (d) Leeds University Discussion Group, facilitated by Dafydd Mills Daniel

Our meeting consisted of four students, two 'theologians' and two 'religious studies' students, although one RS student was unsure what this category meant.

Despite the students' advanced level of study, our meeting met with a tentative start, hinting at a certain lack of clarity concerning the difference (at least practical, if not theoretical) between theology and religious studies. The RS student who was the most wary of her classification felt that a background in the study of theology and/or religious studies would have helped her be clearer about the way to define 'theology' and 'religious studies'. However, due to the nature of the different ways of studying each discipline, at different institutions, at different times, it was felt that a university background in the study would not necessarily help one reach an (definitive) explanation. It was clear that those who ventured definitions for theology and/or religious studies did so, on the basis of reading they had done, or a feeling they had for what might be a helpful definition through their study of particular areas associated with either discipline. Departmental discussion of theology/religious studies seemed to have played little or no part in the conclusions they had arrived at.

It was apparent that it was felt easier to characterise 'theology', rather than 'religious studies', and that it was the religious studies students who were the most willing to voice their understandings of theology. A popular view was that theology is 'faith seeking understanding'. Although one student commented that it was not impossible for those

who did not share that faith to study theology, it was necessary that the student had a sympathetic engagement with the object(s) of theology. A more limited understanding of theology was that it was predominantly the study of the Christian religion. Our uncertain RS student voiced this view, and did so as a concern, because she felt that such a limited discipline became almost artificial: it is not an accurate reflection of society, nor perceptively engaged with the religious debates that now surround the traditional tenets of religious faith (e.g. the various ways of understanding the nature and will of God). At the least, she felt that theology, as the study of God (taken from a literal interpretation of the word itself), meant that religions, and/or religious impulses, without God are excluded. In response, our other RS student contended that theology can incorporate the study of non-theistic religions by addressing their faith structures, and that all religions have theology, and thus that you can study the theology of any religion. It is merely 'an historical accident' that the study of Christian theology takes place in secular universities, rather than religious arenas.

One of our theologians argued that religious studies is an exploration of 'religious traditions as movements within a society', placed within their 'political context', with an 'assessment of belief systems'. While theology was more associated simply with a study of the 'belief systems' themselves. The suggestion that religious studies had been seen as comparative religion was raised, but it was agreed that religious studies does not need to study more than one religion to be religious studies, and nor does it simply have to study non-Christian movements. As the discussion continued, we questioned whether or not one definition for religious studies was that, in fact, it lacked any clear definition. Since no single methodology dominated the subject, the thing that made RS distinctive was in fact the subject's variety. One RS student argued that religious studies is an 'interdisciplinary methodology based on particular academic expertise', and is consequently 'defined by the subject not the methodology', making it akin to cultural or film studies. It was admitted, however, that one of the areas of expertise brought to bear in religious studies could be theology, and that theology, like religious studies, did itself take into account different academic disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, history, and so on.

The idea that theology is the historical study of religion, as opposed to religious studies as an examination of 'how religion functions here and now', was not popular. In the end, the agreement seemed to be that religious studies set aside both truth and definition claims. Thus RS is the study of 'religion', without any particular view or end in mind, making it analogous to sociology in certain respects. Whilst theology does not have to be studied from a faithful perspective, it is at least a willful engagement with ideas and arguments viewed from a particular perspective (mainly the doctrinal).

Turning to the place of theology and religious studies in the 'Academy', everyone seemed to agree that separation was undesirable, and, at any rate, impossible. One RS student suggested that faith/ideological backgrounds will interfere with any study of religion, and that religious studies belongs, in some sense, somewhere near to theology, almost, the implication seemed to be, so that this possibility for conflict is kept in view. She felt very strongly that theological themes, such as interfaith dialogue and confessional theology, have no place in religious studies, or even perhaps in a secular academic institution. She also found that many people assumed she studied theology, simply because she was a student within a specific university department? which was a source of great annoyance. One theologian argued in response that personal beliefs and agendas, on behalf of staff and students, were unavoidable in any discipline, and that this was why a range of academics and approaches was necessary in any university study. For example, in political science, Marxist lecturers in the UK are capable of discussing Marxism, despite the fact that their society, institution and perhaps even audience, may disagree with their personal viewpoint. However, this makes it no less important an area to study, nor does it affect their ability to teach it, and nor, by teaching what they believe, are they a means of influencing and interfering with the general academic study of the subject.

While it was suggested that academic rigour should make it possible for someone to teach even what they do not believe, the idea remained that theology inevitably, and necessarily, assumes certain things about its students. Theology would seem to endorse a certain worldview, into which its students, even if not believers, wish to become initiated. One RS student felt that theology assesses the truth or falsity of particular religious ideas, assessing their credibility as intellectual data: thus a distinction between theology and religious studies was essential so that religious studies could remain one of the social sciences.

One of our theologians felt that the study of theology in secular institutions, alongside religious studies, was important for the believer, if not the discipline itself. Thus, despite the RS student's reservations about vocational and confessional theology in secular institutions, it is helpful to would-be ministers to study in such an environment. It was clear that the RS student was concerned about being associated with theology, and thus saw the distinction between the two disciplines more clearly, and saw it as crucial to her studies.

The majority of attendees felt that it was not within the remit of the academic study of either discipline to directly influence movements in religious thought. However, it was unclear whether this was a view that would differ if theology was considered from the perspective of a vocational study, and it was noted that this might be a difference between the way the study of theology and religious studies is viewed in Britain and America. Thus, we concluded that depending on the university, department and preferred subject definitions, theology and RS was studied and understood in very different ways and highly dependent on how one chose to interpret them.

4. Conclusions

From both the online survey, and the peer discussion groups, certain central issues arose:

1. Definitions of 'theology', 'religious studies' and 'religion', are crucial to student interpretation of these terms.
2. The chosen university and course does affect how students interpret these terms, and how students comprehend the relationship between the subjects.
3. The relationship between the subjects seemed to focus on the 'insider/outsider' debate?perhaps due to the use of th is concept in the online survey.

Although both surveys only reached a small proportion of graduate students in the UK, the responses we received were detailed and provided us with a great deal of information about student opinion.

As this project demonstrated, there is interest in this topic; thus the surveys could be expanded in the future, and conducted in more universities? again by graduate students?to get a broader view of the situation.

The online survey provided information from 10 universities (it was sent to 11). Gathering responses was difficult because it relied on staff passing the email onto students, and then for students to read the email and fill in the survey. We found that students who were genuinely interested in the topic responded to the initial email, and thus gave us very detailed responses.

Within the survey itself, we attempted to leave open-ended questions, so that students could choose how to respond. We were unsure about the appropriateness of definitions as they could provide some additional responses, perhaps fueling a more heated debate. However, the noticeable lack of definitions seemed to provide interesting responses in itself and gave students the opportunity to discuss the topics as they saw fit.

The peer discussion groups provided more information and gave students the opportunity to discuss the issues between themselves, within their own chosen framework. These groups demonstrated clear differences between the universities, and the discussions all led to interesting conclusions. We found that only students who were interested in the subject went to the discussion groups, but that they often had clear viewpoints and again provided detailed responses to the questions asked. Since the respondents appear to be self-selecting according to their own interest in the topic, we are inevitably excluding the views of a significant proportion of all graduate students from our sample?thus we do not claim our study to be representative of all graduate students, but rather to give insight into the de bate from the students' perspective.

4. (a) Definitions

Through the online survey, we found that most students interpreted theology as a course that privileged the 'insider'

viewpoint. Although nonbelievers can study it, they will not be able to fully understand the 'confessional' elements of the subject. Interestingly, 28.3% stated that theology was God-centred, 17% claimed that it was Christian based, and 15% stated that it was the study of a specific set of beliefs from one religion, typically Christianity. Only one student thought that the theology of any subject could be studied.

The peer discussion groups demonstrated the differences between university teaching structures and opinions. For example, at Edinburgh, students began by using the university's definition, which made discussion slightly easier, but not as versatile because it did not necessarily reflect student opinion. This was in direct comparison to Leeds students, who decided to define theology themselves during the discussion. They admitted that they were unsure whether they could provide a clear or complete definition, and concluded that it was 'faith seeking understanding'.

In both survey types, students found religious studies much harder to define. In the online survey, 28.3% stated that RS was the study of multiple religions, perhaps in a comparative manner, and 16% claimed that it was the (alleged) attempt to study religion(s) from an objective or impartial viewpoint. 11.3% argued that it was not really a subject in its own right, but a subject where one could learn about many approaches, including anthropology, history and sociology. Many students questioned the attempted objectivity in religious studies, with some commenting that this is impossible.

This problem was reflected by the peer discussion groups, with Leeds students stating that it was perhaps the lack of a clear definition which defined 'religious studies'. At Liverpool Hope, students felt that they had an emerging understanding of the subject, rather than any direct explanation.

4. (b) The relationship between theology and religious studies

Student views on the relationship between theology and religious studies seemed highly dependent on their academic backdrop, course and university choice. Whilst reading through the views expressed, the writers became increasingly wary of how their own views may influence the conclusions reached?thus the project manager and another researcher decided to redo elements of the paper once they had left university. Although we all began as 'insiders' of the university system, the 'outsider' perspective became increasingly important when trying to assess our conclusions from a fair and objective viewpoint. Perhaps this could be seen as an analogy of the debate?both the insider and outsider viewpoints of 'religion(s)' need to be respected and understood, to better understand 'religion' as a whole.

From the online survey, we found that students generally thought that theology and RS complement each other and are closely related. 69% of respondents thought that the disciplines 'can and should' coexist in academic institutions, whilst only 5 people stated that they should be kept completely separate. 25.7% of the students surveyed agreed with the statement 'They are compatible but in a very limited capacity'.

As for the basic structuring of a faculty or department, the three options were that theology and religious studies should be taught together, separately, or together 'when appropriate'. A slight majority of respondents agreed that a department should combine theology and religious studies when appropriate.

With respect to the teaching of these subjects, many students (65%) responded that 'differences in methodology/approach should be made clearer.' This may suggest a need for such explanation prior to any attempt to define or to draw a distinction between theology and religious studies. Indeed, the students' response to another question confirms such speculation: surprisingly, given the apparent interest and the strength of opinion on issues in this topic, 43% of respondents (both theology and RS students) declared that their lecturers/tutors 'have not discussed the relationship'.

The peer discussion groups provided a more detailed insight into the central debate.

At Edinburgh, students felt that the subjects could co-exist, but that the faculty name may need changing to 'cultural studies'? although this could mean that those doing vocational courses require a separate faculty.

At Liverpool Hope, students thought that the philosophy of religion could be used to structure a critique of the subjects. They concluded that theology should be considered a subset of religious studies?although theology provides the more detailed understandings of religion(s), the methodologies employed in religious studies can bring all religions together for discussion.

In direct contrast, Oxford students thought that the attempted objectivity or neutrality of RS (presumably advocated by RS scholars) was impossible?everyone comes from a particular viewpoint. They argued that RS heavily relied on the details provided by theologians, thus it may be better to have religion-specific departments. Since no definition of 'religious studies' could be reached, they suggested that a department entitled **Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies**, could be used for those students who wished to study more than one religion, but this then brings into question the location of those students who want to employ RS methodologies for the study of one religion.

At Leeds, students considered universities secular institutions and thus the study of religion from an 'insider' perspective was 'an historical accident'; religion from the 'inside' should only be discussed in religious arenas. Although the insider viewpoint is an object of study, it is not a critical element in one's study. Thus it is important to attempt objectivity when studying, because the university is supposed to be a secular arena.

From both surveys, we can see that definitions and academic backdrop play vital roles in student interpretation of the debate. In general, students have not been engaged in the debate by lecturers, but rather from their own personal interest and choices. Although the theology and/or RS debate seemed to focus on the insider/outsider debate, many students felt that religious convictions were not essential to one's personal study, but important as an object of study. Some students expressed a desire to learn about a specific religion from a religious practitioner, the 'insider privilege'. However, many recognised the importance of religious studies (or an equivalent department) in providing an (attempted) objective arena for discussion and debate.

Although this project was limited by the number of responses, it demonstrates the importance of gauging graduate views and it should demonstrate the impact of the university teaching on the understanding of theology and/or religious studies.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Below is the breakdown of the combined number of responses from two Internet survey requests sent to eleven universities; students from ten universities provided responses.

Number of Respondents	University
48	Edinburgh
32	Oxford
14	Durham
10	Leeds
8	Lancaster
7	Cambridge
4	Liverpool Hope
3	Birmingham

2	SOAS
2	Bristol
130	Total

Gender: Female: 45.2%, Male: 54.8%

Subject: Theology: 46.9%, RS: 26%, Both theology and RS: 16.2%, Other: 16.9%

The range of subjects categorised as other included: philosophy of religion, psychology, biblical studies, practical theology, history and religious studies, ministry and oriental studies.

Appendix 2 ? selected quotations from respondents

'It is possible for those not belonging to the religion in question to study that religion's theology; it often seems strange to do so since studying theology ... often requires one to take the stance of a believer attempting to elucidate his faith.'
Oxford University Masters student

'Anyone can study theology, but they won't understand its true goal unless they are willing to engage with the God whom they are studying'

Liverpool Hope University Ministry student

'Study and understanding should not be considered equivalent' Cambridge University Masters student

'If possible, I would like to suggest further comparative studies on the relation between RS and theology in the world academia (e.g. UK and USA, or Japan/Korea or Africa and Europe).'

Edinburgh University Masters student

'It seems that RS students are often more aware of theological issues because RS is more broad while theological students often look down on RS as it is not as rigidly confined to the 'important doctrines' but tries to take into account settings, interactions, philosophies underlying and influencing the working out of the theology.'

Edinburgh University Masters student

'The comparison between RS and theology in this survey is flawed. A more appropriate terminology throughout should have compared RS to 'theological studies' or 'religion' to 'theology).'

Lancaster University Masters student

'The perspectives from outside the faiths are important and stop the disciplines from getting stagnant, but it must also be recognised that the perspective people come from shapes their thought in a very real way.'

Durham University Masters student

'People always ask me whether I am going to become a vicar simply because I am always studying theology. Unfortunately there is a perceived association between faith and the study of theology that I do not think exists with RS. This is not so?I have no religious belief at all!'

Edinburgh University Masters student

'I reject completely the position ... that a prior commitment to a particular faith tradition is needed if one is to claim to be doing theology in that tradition, that is, that without the prior faith commitment ... one is 'merely' doing RS'.

Lancaster University Masters student

Endnotes

1. The range of subjects included: philosophy of religion, psychology, biblical studies, practical theology, history and religious studies, ministry, and oriental studies.

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