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## **“Changing the ‘Subject’ in Religious Studies”: Reflections upon “Learning outside the Lecture Theatre” in the Undergraduate Study of Religion**

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on research undertaken for a Higher Education Academy project investigating pedagogic approaches to tutor-led fieldwork in the undergraduate study of religion. It explores three categories of engaging with religion – reported, represented and lived religion – and values student voices, exploring how students interact with ‘living religion’ and seeking to understand how this affects their learning engagement with religious communities. It seeks to provide underpinning approaches for the formulation of a practical pedagogy for tutor-led fieldwork in religious studies in direct response to evolving methodologies concerning how researchers and tutors approach the study of religion. It also asks questions concerning the ‘fit’ of this approach within the limitations of contemporary TRS in UK HEIs.

### **Keywords**

Undergraduate Pedagogy, Religious Studies, Lived Religion, Represented Religion, Reported Religion, Fieldwork, Study Visits, Study Tours.

### **‘Changing the Subject’: Engaging with Living Religions**

The subject matter of this short article has developed out of a 2011-2012 Higher Education Academy grant-funded project titled *Developing Fieldwork in Religious Studies: Possibilities and Practicalities*. The project focused specifically upon how departments of TRS across the UK managed UK-based and

international tutor-led field visits and study tours within their curricula, with particular interest in the management of learning outcomes and assessment opportunities for students. The project consisted of three stages; (1) Questionnaires, (2) Interviews and (3) A one-day conference in London in March 2012 which brought together staff from nine different HEIs to share best practice and discuss future developments in the management of this often under-developed area of the curriculum. This article also draws on the experience of the authors in leading study tours and study visits for undergraduate students in Europe, Asia, North America, the Middle East and across the UK.

The common theme between the HEIs that took part in the HEA project was a focus on an understanding of 'Living Religion' in their degree programmes, and for most institutions this manifests itself in the form of taking students beyond the lecture theatre to experience religious rituals first-hand, to speak with religious participants or stakeholders, and to physically interact with buildings, communities or spaces of significance for individuals and communities that hold religious worldviews. As this can encompass such a wide range of activities and approaches, the group came to use the phrase 'learning outside the lecture theatre' to describe the core activity that was shared between different institutions. Across UK universities that teach religion, it was common for students to engage in day visits (often adjacent to, but not directly linked with learning outcomes of course modules) and foreign residential study tours (although not always assessed as a part of the student's degree programme). Such activities, although often labelled together as engaging with living religion, represent a wide diversity of approaches to student expectations, tutor management and learning outcomes.

The popular phrase 'Living Religion' is, also, problematic. Within undergraduate pedagogy in the UK, the phrase finds its origins with the Bath Spa University project of the same name (discussed in this issue by Robinson and Cush), which pioneered a codified approach to extra-campus engagement with religions in the 1970s, and which has acted as an exemplar of reflective and evolving good practice ever since. However, within numerous degree programmes across the UK, the phrase seems to be used simply to justify vague notions of 'contemporary religion' or 'field trips', tacked on as afterthoughts to more 'traditional' engagements with history, text or phenomenology. This is a huge missed opportunity.

In this article, we wish to argue that a deep engagement with 'Living Religion' needs to sit at the core of how we approach the undergraduate Study of Religion and, by initiating this pedagogic shift, note that changes occur, not just in the very subject we are studying, but also in the roles of individual students as neophyte researchers as they interact as participants within the lives of religious actors and their physical and emotional environments.

In our work to date, we have used 'Living Religion' as a precise term within a tripartite understanding of how students engage with religious ideas, communities and ways of thinking – namely, 'reported', 'lived' and 'represented' religion. As our research is primarily pedagogical, we are interested in the student learning experience that takes place during interaction with 'lived' or 'represented' religion, as opposed to 'reported' religion. By 'reported' religion, we mean traditional text book commentaries on religious traditions, which for a long time have formed the basis of much standard lecture-theatre based teaching in our subject. Also within this category, we include mainstream news media and new media sources, which impact hugely upon undergraduate student's primary or underpinning knowledge of given religious communities (whether we would

like this or not) – particularly controversial new groups, or controversial issues within established groups. By ‘lived’ religion - akin to Malinowski’s ‘actions’ of a social group (Parsons, 2002) - we mean the practical engagement with individuals or groups from religious communities who are performing, living or acting in ways required of, or inspired by, their given religious community and identity. By ‘represented’ religion - akin to Malinowski’s ‘norms’ of a social group - we mean the ‘public’ or ‘host’ persona, and projected religious identity, of these religious communities, as projected to students or researchers during individual or group visits to the communities in question, often through the verbal or physical redaction of a ‘gatekeeper’ or host/guide appointed by the community in question. Of course, there is complexity within these terms, and the current trend for understanding ‘living’ religion may well be complicated by the need for a deeper analysis of the possibility (or not) of moving past ‘represented’ religion to an understanding of ‘living’ religion in the limited practicalities and possibilities of undergraduate engagement – an issue beyond the scope of this short article, but which is expanded in our forthcoming work (Gregg & Scholefield, 2014). With that caveat, however, it is timely that there should be a re-appraisal of practical pedagogies in the light of recent methodological calls for a realignment of how we approach the study of religion.

Changing how we view Religion means changing how we approach the Study of Religion. Harvey, in *Food, Sex and Strangers*, for example, argues that religion is best understood by the ways in which people negotiate their lives, rather than in affirmations of belief (Harvey, 2013) an approach which, if accepted, necessitates a physical and relational engagement with the ‘living’ or ‘represented’ religion offered by student engagement outside the lecture theatre, as opposed to the ‘reported’ religion of textbooks and primary sources orientated around conceptions of belief or doctrine. As far back as 1997, Russell T. McCutcheon used the phrase “the poverty of the theory of the classroom” when referring to what he perceived to be stagnant approaches to religion (McCutcheon, 1997, p. 150) and at present here in the UK a volume is being prepared on pedagogic responses to the Study of Religions post-World Religions paradigm. As theoretical contributions to methodology evolve, so must practical pedagogies, and much of this change impacts upon possibilities for student engagement outside the lecture theatre.

Much energy in this area is focused upon the relationship between religion, location and geopolitics, all of which are highly relevant to understanding how “learning outside the lecture theatre” affects how students engage with the Study of Religion. Recent texts include Stausberg’s *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters* (2010) and Alex Norman’s *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (2013). In addition, Karner & Parker’s ‘Religious and Non-Religious Practices and the City’ (2012), a study of a specific part of Birmingham, rather than a study of specific “faith communities” within Birmingham, explores important concepts of locality-based studies which may serve as an exemplar beyond the strait-jacket of traditional undergraduate engagement with ‘a Vaishnava Hindu Temple’ or ‘a Sunni Muslim Mosque’. This has important implications for how tutors take students into the field and offers intriguing possibilities for moving beyond established models of Study Tours, where it is clear from our work with multiple HEIs to date, that a particular tradition, or group of traditions is the focus of a visit or tour.

Opportunities for student engagement with living religion, or “learning outside the lecture theatre” therefore need to be carefully managed by tutors in the light of changing methodological approaches to *how* we study religion, ensuring that our practical pedagogy is reflective and representative of recent shifts in attitude. Long gone (we hope, but fear not) are the days of “field trips” – surely this unhelpful and unacademic phrase must be changed to “study visit” – where

students are passive attendees in cold empty buildings divorced of cultural and religious context. In new developments of practical pedagogy for engaging with Living Religion, the role of the student as interactive learner needs to be recognised as a key dynamic in the nature and efficacy of the learning activity and outcomes that are designed on a group level by tutors, but often experienced on an individual level by students, which affects their personal learning process and learning outcomes.

## **‘Changing the Subject’: Student ‘Guesthood’ and ‘Intimacy’ – Pilgrimage or Polemics vs Methodological Agnosticism**

By reflecting upon the very personalised approaches that students bring to their study tours and field visits, we hope to better understand the ways in which students engage with religion in practical settings, and consequently further our understanding of the development of a practical pedagogy in religious studies, which is specifically focused upon learning outside the lecture-theatre, but is also firmly embedded within the evolving methodologies and approaches underpinning on-campus teaching curricula.

One way in which we are seeking to do this is to understand the learning process that occurs for students who approach tutor-led group activities in different ways. The title of this section makes reference to pilgrimage and polemic, about which examples are given below, but also the concept of methodological agnosticism, to which we will now briefly turn, to clarify our use of the phrase. Whilst the history of this term in the phenomenology of religion is well known, in its origin with Smart (Smart, 1973), later deconstructions by Fitzgerald (Fitzgerald, 2000) and Hervieu-Leger (Hervieu-Leger, 2000) and eloquent analysis by Cox (Cox, 2003), we are not here attempting to analyse this concept through the eyes of theoreticians of our subject, but crucially to seek to understand the role of the researcher through the eyes of undergraduate students. By so doing, we are seeking to understand how the ‘personal learning position’ of an individual undergraduate student may influence their learning outcomes. Indeed, at this formative level of undergraduate study, it is essential for us as tutors and lecturers to empathise with student’s own understandings of their role in any attempts to balance objectivity and self-reflective engagement. Of course, scholars such as Gardell (Gardell, 1999) and Hufford (Hufford, 1999) argue that true objectivity is an unachievable methodology, and the desirability of the very notion of objectivity is often questioned - a particularly helpful recent contribution to this debate has been provided by the sociologist of New Religions, Susan Palmer (Palmer, 2010).

To address theoretical issues concerning participant observation (even at first year undergraduate level), we have found that the notion of intimacy between the student and their learning experiences in the field, and the way that this changes their interaction with the ‘subject’ of their learning, has played an important part in our research to date. In the brief constraints of this article, there are two areas which are interesting to highlight. First, there is the intimacy of the sacred space or the issue of ‘Empty vs. Living Spaces’. Visits to places of worship often take the form of arranged visits to meet an agreed host to view a sacred space – and yet it is relatively rare for such an experience to occur whilst the building or complex is occupied for ceremonies or rituals. Visits to sites of worship that are presented as empty spaces to students cannot, by definition, provide the student with a complete engagement with the purpose and meaning of that sacred space and the community that uses it. Whilst a host will often provide excellent survey information to students, there will necessarily be a ‘gap’ in the student experience.

Distinct from this approach is the involvement of students in actual religious events that occur in these sacred spaces, where the spaces become living sites of religion for the communities in question. These range from ‘passive’ attendance at Christian or Sikh ceremonies to practical

engagement in receiving Hindu Arti, meditating with a Buddhist monk, dowsing for leylines on Glastonbury Tor or using a Scientology E-Meter with a trained Auditor. Secondly, during the initial research for our recent HEA project, it became clear that the host or guide at a religious community or site played a vital role in the student learning experience. This does not refer to the simplistic fact that some people are better communicators than others, but refers specifically to the methodological approach that is taken by these guides, often unconsciously, which affects their approach to their, often voluntary, duties in helping and guiding students. Labelling this factor as 'Caretaker vs. Karma-Yogin', it is apparent that the intimacy generated between the students and the sacred site or religious community is deepened when the guide is themselves undertaking a religious action in engaging with the students.

The term 'Karma-Yogin' is borrowed from the Hindu tradition, wherein it refers to a devotee who performs a religious duty with no desire for reward. This elevates the individual's role beyond that of a mere guide or caretaker and means that there is a process of religious action occurring in the interaction with the students. Put simply, the very act of guiding and educating students becomes a religious act for the individual. Such a dynamic occurs during visits to Skanda Vale, a 'Hindu' community in Wales, where the guide, in his role as a monk, talks to the students about the practicalities of taking vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Whilst this role could be undertaken by a trained guide, the dynamic of intimacy between students and their learning experience is deepened tremendously by the fact that the monk is actually performing part of his dharma, or religious duty, by undertaking seva, or service to humanity, as a practical example of his duty as a karma-yogin. At Skanda Vale, therefore, students are not just being informed, but are themselves part of a hermeneutic of religious service in the life of the host and guide.

This impacts interestingly upon the notion of 'represented religion' and the ways in which religion is encountered by students in the field – supporting Harvey's notion of 'Guesthood' (Harvey, 2003) as a methodology for fieldwork. In his article, Harvey argues that the researcher has a responsibility to research *with* rather than *on* or *against* your chosen subject (Harvey here refers to Smith, 1999) and increasing student intimacy with their subject of study, as outlined above, aids the breakdown of dualistic approaches to subject-object research. In our research to date, we have collected student narrative testimonies – reflections upon their learning experiences, examples of which are given below. The use of narrative testimony here is particularly interesting to our research; moving beyond simple 'student stories' we have utilised discourse analysis to seek to understand the ways in which students interact with their subject of study – and in so doing become subjects themselves – in intimate engagement with religions outside the lecture theatre. The examples that follow are real events, although some specifics have been changed to ensure anonymity.

A recent undergraduate study tour to Rome coordinated by one of the authors was undertaken as part of an undergraduate curriculum approach to religious studies that uses fieldwork extensively to encounter lived religion. Throughout our research to date, it is clear that there is strong support for the view that studying contemporary religion at university should enable students to develop the skills to engage with 'lived' or real religion and this involves being a participant observer at ritual - an approach to religious studies that uses fieldwork extensively to encounter what Robert Jackson calls "real religion" (Jackson, 1997). One approach to this is to teach religious studies, not in order to convey information about religions but, as Maria Harris says, to incarnate subject matter (Harris, 1981, 41f). If students engage with religious ideas, places, people and practices then it is possible that *they* will be transformed, as well as their understanding. This approach to teaching religious

studies considers it as a form of dialogue in which the outcomes cannot be predicted and where there is some risk. 'The relation in education', Martin Buber wrote, 'is one of pure dialogue' (Buber 1965, 98). The educator, through understanding the student, selects what will be educational for the student and also acts as the means through which the student encounters what is to be learned. And for that to happen there has to be *engagement*; students also have to bring aspects of themselves to the process.

In the evaluation of the Rome study tour Maria wrote that 'As an atheist I can learn about religion but I do not want to participate in prayer during visits to churches or singing songs after dinner'. On Sunday there was a visit to a Mass in English, which was not compulsory, and one evening we had supper in a restaurant run by an international order of nuns who sing 'Ave Maria' in the restaurant as part of their evening prayer. Students were participant observers unless they chose more active involvement as some did, but Maria's polemic suggests that for her it was also a personally charged experience.

The boundaries between study, tourism and pilgrimage are not as clear cut as we might think; neither is this ambiguity a merely postmodern phenomenon. In his article "Encountering God: personal reflections on "geographer as pilgrim" (Slater, 2004) Terry Slater describes how his visit to Bologna (which was mainly for an academic conference) was historical, spatial and personal. He visited the site of the bombing at Bologna station where two of his ex-students had died and had an experience of the motherhood of God. He calls this experience a 'pilgrimage' although it was not to a recognised pilgrimage site. For Slater, a place with historical links becomes a pilgrimage place with "the complex layering of time and place in the lived world of the individual" (p251). Maybe the composite term 'religious tourism' emphasises, as Coleman and Eade argue in their introduction to *Reframing Pilgrimage*, that 'the journey as demonstration of freedom, unconstrained by a search for salvation, ... moves from an emphasis on suffering to one of pleasure, as well as the pursuit of knowledge' (Coleman & Eade, 2004, 24). Stausberg's recent *Religion and Tourism* (2010) is subtitled 'crossroads, destinations and encounters' and argues not only for affinities between the two ideas but to an approach which explores the interfaces between them. Bert Roebben (2009) has coined the term 'narthical religious learning' to explore a pilgrim's way of learning. Although disagreeing with his view that there is a sharp distinction between 'tourist' and 'pilgrim', we agree with him that 'you can also travel like a pilgrim: contemplative, open to surprises and taking time to digest the experience quietly' (p19) and that this describes an educational experience. The 'narthex' is the entrance hall of a church – so a 'zone between the outer secular world and the inner sacred space' (p23) and in Roebben's view a 'place of encounter' (p25). When a student enters any sacred place there is, therefore, the possibility of a meaningful encounter which opens up possibilities for exploring 'academic', 'personal' and 'spiritual' meanings.

It is therefore likely that Maria's polemic was caused because she found herself in 'close encounters' with Roman Catholic ritual. As a 'post-Protestant' she was very uncomfortable attending worship because it challenged her twice – once because it was Christian and then a second time because it was Catholic. She had had no trouble, earlier in the year, attending a Sabbath morning service and made a very good presentation of what she had learned. It is worth noting that, at a recent HEA conference, in one very interesting workshop on participant observation, all the fieldwork described was of what might be called 'exotic' places of worship – not one of the students had explored 'mainstream' Christianity. This may be because ethnography is often used to study non-familiar cultures but may also be because, for some students, it is less personally challenging to avoid the

intersections with their own journey. Whilst this may be an understandable stance for some individuals to take, it may also be a missed opportunity for tutors in engaging their students with ‘majority’ religious systems, with which they may not be as familiar as they may think – an issue clearly highlighted in the work of Dinham (2011) and the Religious Literacy leadership Project.

Similarly, a recent study tour to New York coordinated by one of the authors provided an example of testimony outlining the transformative encounter that one student experienced in relation to his learning experience at the Church of Scientology. The student had approached the visit with deep scepticism, nearing on polemic – indeed, he stated in his learning journal that “I was expecting to find a modern, well-rehearsed slick welcome and introduction by the members of the New York Church, but I was also not expecting to be convinced that Scientology was a bona fide religion – my personal biases refused to allow me to consider this for even one minute.” However, during the visit, the student made personal use of an e-meter, and found the experience so valuable that he returned the next day for a full session of auditing counselling. For John, his academic engagement with Scientological ritual following his intensively shared, and completely unplanned, ritualistic experience produced significant change. In his learning journal he wrote of a “journey” recognising that his pre-conceived ideas about Scientology were unacademic, and unhelpful, highlighting as they did a binary understanding between subject and object in field research. John’s first hand interaction in the field had, therefore, changed the very subject of study (Scientology) from reported religion to an deeper understanding through engagement with represented religion and lived religion, and his role as object-subject had transformed into a self-reflective subject-subject learning experience. Religion, for John, had ceased to be institutional, and became individualized. Reported religion had given way to lived religion.

Recognising our limited assumptions about people, places and religions (giving up some of our polemic) seeing things with new eyes and from different perspective (methodological agnosticism) and learning that is personally meaningful and significant (pilgrimage) can all contribute powerfully to student learning in religious studies. Religious tourism offers students opportunities for learning about religion in nuanced and reflective ways. It is the use to which these experiences are put that is of crucial import – the argument of whether personal faith or polemical journeys have a place in the university setting is actually secondary; it is the import of the transformative experience that is key – our aim and hope is to channel these experiences of lived and represented religion into the context of reported religion, so that students may use off-campus learning experiences to critically analyse both textbook and media ‘reported’ religion.

### **‘Changing the Subject’: Multi-Methodological Approaches, Embedding ‘Living Religion’ within the curriculum, and the Fragmented Identity of the Study of Religion within UK HEIs**

The promotion of tutor-led fieldwork, or undergraduate pedagogy in Religious Studies, is a response to not only changing methodological approaches to both the academic study of religion and the place of religion in contemporary society, but also the changing landscape of Theology and Religious Studies within UK HEIs. Student interactions with religions outside the lecture theatre is, we argue, an essential part of understanding (and, indeed, experiencing) the phenomenon of religion for undergraduates. However, one definite outcome of our recent research to date has been a heightened awareness of the challenges – practical and pedagogical – which face colleagues across the UK from feeling confident with this approach to undergraduate programme management.



Challenges are many – departments are fragmented more than ever before, with ‘religion’ often being merged or subsumed into history, politics, philosophy or sociology in institutions across the UK. There are also perennial challenges surrounding the discourse between Theology and Religious Studies when approaching methodologies for study visits and study tours; especially with regard to reflective student assessments and the design of learning outcomes specific to students on mixed groups of Theology and Religious Studies students from the same institution. More than anything else, however, is the logistical pressure felt by colleagues within the new marketised economy of HE in the UK. Put simply, with fewer staff and greater pressures on our time, increased health and safety concerns and reduced budgets for what some senior management teams and faculty heads still misunderstand as ‘extra-curricular’ activities, it may seem a strange time in the development of our discipline to be arguing for a re-focus centred on student engagement outside the lecture theatre. But this would be to miss the point.

Focusing on tutor-led student engagement with living religion not only introduces realistically achievable ethnographic approaches that are not always accessible to undergraduates (how many second year undergraduates are going to disappear to the Solomon Islands for a year?) but also opens up new possibilities for supporting neophyte researchers in their progression through their studies to higher levels (particularly Honours Projects and Masters level) where they will often be required to undertake more traditional elements of individual fieldwork or ethnography. It also ensures that tutors can engage students with new ways of approaching religion based on evolving research methodologies. There is much good practice across HEIs; several examples of which are highlighted in this volume; however there is a crucial pedagogic step that needs to be taken – not just in staff delivery, but in the management of student expectations and approaches to engagement with living religion. If the engagement is codified, embedded in a wider curriculum which references the learning experiences gained in the field visit or study tour, and forms a significant part of the student’s portfolio of assessments, then such fieldwork becomes central to the relationship between tutors and students, and forms a core part in the student’s understanding of ‘what religion is’ as well as ‘how to approach religion’.

Some departments are already making steps in this direction. One HEI has recently created a 0.5 post specifically to use Anglican religious sites as educational tools for both theology and education students, another HEI is now offering students a guaranteed international study tour as a part of their ‘degree package’ and another still utilises an international study tour to underpin research projects for final year dissertation students. Assessments, too have shown innovation, with HEIs offering field reports, reflective study journals, poster presentations, oral presentations, blogs and vlogs as effective ways for students to disseminate their knowledge. There is much good practice, which should be celebrated.

It is also relevant, however, to note (as Corrywright does in this volume) the potential concern regarding student numbers attracted to the study of religion in the new fees era of UK academia. Numbers seem to be down and one way of addressing this could be to re-orientate how we approach undergraduate curricula concerning religion. Understanding, and valuing, students roles in their own learning, offering interactive and innovative assessments, and embedding genuine personal academic engagement with living religious communities into the core of our approach to the study of religion may well be one way to address this issue, as we seek to attract a new

generation of students to a new generation of theories and methodologies concerning the study of religion.

During the course of our research to date, we have sought to highlight best practice in existing HEIs, and so it is perhaps appropriate to conclude this short article by referencing such work. At the University of Wolverhampton, the following assessment is used to introduce students to fieldwork in a Hindu religious community:

“Read and make a note of a textbook account of Hinduism. Identify three questions that you would like to ask informants at the two Mandirs visited. (1) How does the information obtained on your three questions compare from the informants’ views and attitudes with that of your selected textbook version? (2) Analyse critically how you account for such differences. (3) Explore the implications of emic and etic perspectives when studying religion. (4) Explore how experiences may shape an informant’s responses.”

This very interesting assessment exercise is an excellent example of an effective learning experience of ‘lived religion’. This exercise supports structured engagement with ‘reported’ and ‘living’ religion, and may be extended with further interaction with ‘represented religion’ – which is hinted at in the last section of the assessment task. In so doing, the tutor is offering a fuller learning experience for the students and, crucially, also allows for a wider conceptualization of the specific subject of study (i.e. a Hindu community), above and beyond textbook ‘reported’ religion and, in so doing, effectively and importantly questions the subject of religious studies, and the place of undergraduate fieldwork and the role of the student in engaged learning experiences - a practical way of appreciating the need to ‘change the subject’ in Religious Studies.

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