Widening participation in Theology departments: experiences, needs and motivations of ‘unbelievers’

Document Version
Final published version

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

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What does ‘unbelief’ mean and who is an ‘unbeliever’ in the context of Theology departments in UK higher education? What are these students’ experiences, needs and motivations? What contributions do they make to academic life and after graduation, and what challenges does their presence pose to staff and students?

Whilst Theology programmes in the UK recruit candidates from all faiths and none, and no religious test is required for successful entry, a preponderance of Christian perspectives still predominates, both in the profiles of participants and in what theologian Tom Beaudoin (2016) has termed the implicit ‘christianicity’ of the discipline. In a recent article, Elaine Graham (2017) argued that addressing this legacy and developing a more inclusive, multi-faith curriculum beyond its current Christian boundaries represents a major priority.

This paper reports on the interims findings of research to develop a strategy for widening participation in Theology programmes. A wide range of data is collected and generated to gauge how well existing provision is responding to a broad-based student constituency drawn from Christian backgrounds as well as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and agnostic traditions. The research considers formal and informal religious affiliation and disaffiliation, inter-religious dialogue and intra-religious debate, and the significance of comparative religious literacy in society.

0. Introduction

This year’s SST conference call suggested several questions we might want to consider; I am responding to three of them.

The first question asks about the role and disposition of theology in a cultural context where unbelief is, or seems to be, in the ascendant. I narrow this down to the teaching of Theology in UK higher education. It is in this context that I respond to the second question of the relationship between faith and doubt. The third question how these
matters might connect to our culture, in a way that leads to the flourishing of all takes me to the heart of my educational vision. My vision is rooted in the experiences, needs and motivations of the students in the room, and not in traditional subject boundaries.

In the following, I investigate how ‘unbelief’ manifests empirically, and who is an ‘unbeliever’ in the context of Theology departments in UK higher education, which recruit students of all faiths and none.

My insights emerge from ongoing research, based at the University of Chester, to develop a strategy for widening participation in practice-based Theology programmes. This involves the creation of a pluralist forum for the benefit of researching professionals from a range of values-based traditions and world-views. For more than a decade, the Professional Doctorates in Practical Theology at the Universities of Chester, Birmingham, Anglia Ruskin and Glasgow have supported researching professionals not only from a range of UK-based and international Christian backgrounds, but also Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and those who I provisionally describe as value-guided agnostics. What they all have in common is their conscious enrolment on a religion-based academic programme, more specifically a Christianity-based programme.

One aspect of our research is to generate primary data that allows us to gauge how well existing provision is responding to this broad-based student constituency.

Unfortunately, the launch of an online alumni questionnaire was delayed, and therefore data collection is still ongoing. However, the responses we have received so far already show an emerging pattern which I summarize in the last part of this paper. I also refer to published primary data from other research into contemporary plural identities,
practices and affiliations, especially among young people. I add to this a survey of conceptual contributions in sociology of religion.

What I aim to problematize in this paper is the adequacy of ‘unbelief’ as an organizing principle in UK Theology departments when considering students’ formal and informal religious affiliation and disaffiliation, religious pluralism and fluidity, inter-religious dialogue and intra-religious debate, as well as the significance of comparative religious literacy in society. In the pedagogical context of student-centred learning and teaching, serious attention needs to be paid within Theology to the pluralism that is present in the classroom vis-à-vis the subject of study. Facile insider-outsider binaries, which have been inherited from Christian hegemony and from the dynamic between Theology and Religious Studies as adversarially separate disciplines, do not adequately reflect the complexity of contemporary demographics, and therefore lead to inadequate pedagogical thought and design, and thus hinder the flourishing of all.

1. Conference framework: (Christian) theology and unbelief as distinct and in binary opposition – unbelief within (Christian) theology? Or both?

Before I examine the teaching of Theology, it is useful to define ‘unbelief’. The concept of ‘unbelief’ is conventionally constructed in opposition to the presence of presumed ‘right belief’; this might refer to theistic belief as such or to specific claims such as ‘Torah from Heaven’, ascent to which are considered obligatory. Within the framework of this scholarly Society, the reference point is Christianity without denominational restrictions. Hence there
are two ways of constructing ‘unbelief’ at SST. The first is in opposition to Christianity, the second is within Christianity.

First, to state negatively that a person is an unbeliever vis-à-vis Christianity calls attention to perceived denial or absence. The point of Christian interaction with unbelievers might be evangelism and missionary activity. In the light of demographic developments, Christian mission at home might see itself as increasingly important in the face of the seemingly growing numbers of those who identify as having no religion. I will come back to this category shortly.

[source: British Religion in Numbers, www.brin.ac.uk]

Using the category of unbeliever for non-Christians chooses to ignore the person’s positive identity markers and their commitment to something else such as Buddhism or humanism. This is highly significant for my discussion of teaching Theology later.
To problematize the notion of un-belief further, orthodoxy as a marker of affiliation is clearly not applicable to many religious traditions. The creeds and catechisms are hallmarks of Christian membership; as is the declaration of faith in Islam. Conversely, Judaism is primarily concerned with orthopraxis, including the careful study of scripture to discern what might be considered orthopraxis in a given situation. South Asian religious traditions have no comparable concept of heresy, and they do not deprecate atheistic traditions as marginal dissenters. Approaching this from a different angle, several discussions (Stringer 2013, Cherullavil-Contractor et al. 2013, Sjöborg 2013) of methodological problems point out that surveys and research which seek to quantify and qualify religiousness need to overcome Christian conceptions of religious commitment as indicated by ascent to normative claims and attendance at institutional activities. In other words, focus on ‘unbelief’ in engagement with religious Others is not a universal concern.

I come back to dissent now. My alma mater is the University of Manchester where the teaching of Christian theology originated in the 19th century in the efforts of the local dissenting Christian Colleges to provide for themselves an academic institution that was not Anglican. This brings me to the second way of thinking about ‘unbelief’, namely within Christianity. Sectarian disagreement and violent conflict are every-present in the history of Christianity. The persistence of schisms with the Christian establishment indicates the seriousness of the charge of internal ‘unbelief’. In addition, un-institutionalized groups of ‘unbelievers’ such as homosexual or feminist Christians who struggle with scripture and doctrine tend to seek ways of remaining within their community through emphasis on orthopraxis.
This aspect is often missing from the handy Christianity-derived labels of believing and belonging in much of the literature on changing expressions of religiosity. These concepts of ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’ are arranged in various combinations: believing without belonging (e.g. Davie 1994), belonging without believing (e.g. Robbins and Francis 2010), belonging without commitment (e.g. Leon and Shoham 2018), or neither believing nor belonging (e.g. Voas and Crockett 2005) through intergenerational “failure in religious socialisation” (ibid., 20).
would like to ask respondents what importance religion holds for special events and life-cycle celebrations. Also, do respondents take ‘religion in daily life’ to mean engagement with religious establishment and with public or traditional rituals?

Moving on to Judaism, recent analysis of survey data (Graham, D. and Boyd 2011, 24) claims that Jewish students relate Jewishness to high levels of feeling and being part of the Jewish People (ibid., 32). While their perception also includes strong moral and ethical behaviour, for many this does not directly translate into their own practice (ibid., 32f). Similarly, among those who profess to have a religious identity, many do not participate in ritual practice during term time (ibid., 31). This evidence contradicts my emphasis on Judaism as concerned with orthopraxis, but it does not offer an image of orthodoxy either. The students’ emphasis is on belonging, belonging to an actual or abstract community.

There are no comparable large-scale studies available yet for Muslim students in UK Higher Education. The AHRC- and ESRC-funded project ‘Re/presenting Islam on Campus’ under the direction of Alison Scott-Baumann is currently ongoing, and still to publish empirical findings about Muslim students. In the meantime, a qualitative, small-scale study (Ahmad 2007) concludes that instead of becoming removed from their religion and culture (cf. Guest et al. 2013), female Muslim students used the relative freedom within Higher Education and their newly-gained knowledge and skills to rethink and re-energise their religious and cultural identity and practices.

Additionally, there are those whose identities defy the binary of religious or secular. They have been described (Day, Vincett and Cotter 2013, 1) as ‘fuzzy’: “not (...) in the sense of being confused or muddled, but simply ‘in-between’ (...) or on their way to somewhere
else”. This includes “multiple belongings that are strategically selected”, and being sometimes religious and sometimes non-religious (Day, Vincett and Cotter 2013, 2).

2. Demographics and paradigms in UK ‘(Christian) Theology and …’ departments: insider – outsider division of labour

How do these general demographics relate to student cohorts in Christian Theology in UK Higher Education? I am not aware of any surveys that offer evidence, but my experience tells me that there is a higher concentration of students with strong religious commitments and active participation in religious communities within Theology than in other departments. However, cohorts in Theology are not Christian monocultures. This is due to a large extent to institutional arrangements. Of 29 relevant university departments in the UK, 24 offer combined theology and religious studies degrees which are open to students of all faiths and none. Between them, the scope of non-Christian religious studies varies widely. Conversely, there are only five Divinity departments that approach the study of Christianity confessionally, and do not cover religions other than Christianity. In other words, the majority are TRS departments that offer the study of a range of religious traditions, and are likely to attract a very heterogeneous student body as far as their self-identifications vis-à-vis religion are concerned.

Again, my experience tells me that within TRS departments students take courses across the board. In other words, not only Christianity-related students are present in Christian
Theology classrooms. Starting this paper with a focus on ‘unbelief’ when considering the teaching of Theology, forces the question of standpoint and hegemony. How many TRS departments explicitly advertise their Theology degrees and courses with the qualification ‘Christian’ theology? If not, what does this signal to students and to colleagues offering courses in the thought and philosophy of other traditions?

To keep with my focus on pedagogy, I will examine the way in which learning and teaching is designed in TRS. The current predominant setup seems to me to be the untenable division of labour between (Christian) Theology using an insider approach, and religious studies using an outsider approach. While this might be the outcome of the historical development from exclusive departments of (Christian) Theology to Theology and ... as David Ford (2013) has noted, firstly, this does not lead to coherent degree programmes. Why should the insider approach only be available for the study of Christianity, but not for other religions? Conversely, why should Christianity not be studied using social scientific outsider approaches? It is ironic that the Christian sub-discipline most receptive to social scientific interdisciplinarity is Practical Theology, historically most closely tied to Christian establishment.

Secondly, a strict insider-outsider division of labour between Christian Theology and religious studies does not offer a student-centred model reflective of and addressing the interests of the diversity of religious identities present in the student body. Note as a special case, Tom Greggs’ (2010) experience of devising a degree programme in religious youth work for Muslims and Christians. He highlights the challenge of co-teaching different religious insiders with the aim of preparing them for professional roles in their respective communities. In Gregg's case, these researching professionals’ religious commitments to
either Islam or Christianity are embedded in the curriculum. What I am concerned with are heterogeneous cohorts where identities might be much more fluid than any traditional labels suggest.

I would like to illustrate this with examples from my own context. I teach in the Northwest of England. Here, many local TRS students with a Christian background have a Roman Catholic heritage and/or have attended Catholic schools. In my course on gender issues in contemporary Christianity and Judaism, some of the students explore questions arising from their personal experience of Catholicism. Their self-designed research investigates e.g. why they feel their Catholic schools’ sex education has been inadequate for them, and in what ways this is rooted in Catholic sexual ethics and Catholic anthropology. I have also taught many practicing Muslims on this course although it does not cover Muslim communities. However, their research often uses Jewish Orthodox gender regimes as a safe space to explore their own tradition, albeit indirectly. They do this e.g. by researching constructions of modesty or intermarriage.

What these observations tell me is that the exclusive association of practicing religionists with ‘insider’ study is limiting what students require in order to benefit from the resources TRS can offer. In my first example, those disaffected by their experience of the Catholic establishment are not curious ‘outsiders’. Their research choices indicate that they still have a stake in Catholicism, be it a negative one of trauma to be healed, or a positive one searching for other dissenters within Catholicism whose examples enable them to remain. In this respect, academic theology can function as an alternative to ecclesial institutions and
spaces. Similarly, bell hooks (1991) describes the act of theorizing as a sanctuary where alternative worlds can be imagined in the place of painful realities.

Tom Beaudoin (2011) has coined the category of secular Catholics which seems to me highly appropriate to describe some my Catholic students’ lived religion. Beaudoin (2011, 24-25) describes as secular Catholics those of Catholic heritage who cannot find Catholicism central to the everyday project of their lives, and who are in varying degrees of distance from what they take to be normative or prescribed Catholicism. It includes those who are baptized but non-practicing, possibly religiously illiterate; occasional to never mass-attenders; those who may have left the Church intentionally or redefined their Catholic praxis silently; they might have joined another Christian church; they might live their secularity incl. their spirituality with more investment than their ecclesiality. By borrowing from Jeff Astley’s work on ordinary theology and also from ‘deconversion’ literature, Beaudoin seeks a positive language that captures the richness of contemporary praxis. It is this richness in TRS student bodies that requires positive, deliberate pedagogical design.

In my second example of Muslim students researching Jewish Orthodoxy, they design an implicitly comparative approach to gain distance from their own tradition which in turn enables their critical engagement, and also their learning from the practices of another community who face similar issues. In other words, here the two positions of insider and outsider are strategically combined at the service of clarifying and developing their own religious commitments in whatever direction they decide. They are not ‘curious outsiders’ as in the traditional paradigm of Christian Theology; neither are they taking a distanced
academic view of the Other. The questions they ask of another tradition have a constructive-critical intention.

This brings me to the thorny issue of hospitality, if not to say hegemony, which underlies the binary construction of Christian Theology versus religious studies. Alana Vincent (2016) discusses with great urgency the marginalisation of non-Christian students and scholars of non-Christian traditions caused by their limitation to the outsider approach. In Vincent’s own words, “the only academically acceptable way to study their own culture is as methodological outsiders” (Vincent 2016, 162). I would contend that neither the Christianicity of Theology nor the secularism of religious studies facilitate an academic platform that offers all of its students of all faiths and none the same opportunities for critical-constructive as well as analytical learning and personal development.

3. Pedagogical implications, omissions and opportunities

Current models of engagement within TRS with ‘other’ religions

students’ (and staff!) experiences, needs and motivations?

Internal and wider benefits: widening participation in insider approaches to academic study of religion; comparative religious literacy

The benefits of addressing the needs of diverse and non-Christian insiders not only to individual students but also to Theology and to wider society is discussed in contributions by bell hooks (1991), Amir Al-Islam (2006), Alana Vincent (2016), and in the edited volume Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World (Fernandez 2014).
point of this volume, which is echoed by Al-Islam (2006), Leo Lefebure (2006), Francis Clooney (2013), and Timur Yuskaev (2013) is the demand for theological studies to prepare students well for multi-faith and diverse work and life. This closes the circle between academy and society.

David Ford (2013) and Tom Greggs (2010) propose a scripture-centred curriculum and pedagogy for insider engagement in religiously diverse TRS classrooms. But this requires participants who recognize canonical scriptures as significant and meaningful. In more heterogeneous classrooms where the authority of scripture cannot be assumed as a shared basis, is there any kind of centre or focus point to be found? How can we facilitate the academic and personal flourishing of insiders who do not fit into standard insider characteristics as set by some religious and academic establishments?

As an alternative to a scripture-centred curriculum, the emerging pattern of our alumni survey suggests a student-centred, reflexive approach. Alumni of the Professional Doctorates in Practical Theology report that they benefitted from student-life-near enquiry-based learning because it allowed individuals to investigate issues, concepts and practices of personal significance, but within a supporting structure that is shared with their peers. It is this shared structure that made peer-learning across a wide range of projects possible and meaningful due to overlaps in research methods, sources, and bodies of theory and theology. Alumni noted that diversities between peers were enriching for their own research, helping them to clarify their own arguments, and also resulting in deeper appreciation of Otherness and the impact of context on individual perspectives. Alumni
recognized the vital contribution of reflexivity to their studies through formal and informal
tasks and assignments. Some now describe themselves as confident reflective practitioners.
The significance of future-oriented theological method, in other words the search for
alternative possible worlds, emerges as a highly promising theme with reference to alumni’s
professional trajectories and personal development.

To relate this to the literature, teaching models that correspond to the alumni’s
appreciation of contextually relevant curriculum, that is flexible and open, and which
involves collaborative-dialogical learning that supports the forming of commitment, such
models are developed by Fran Grace (2011), Michel Andraos (2012), Lisa Hess (2013),
and Robert Jackson (2005). What they have in common is the effort to dislocate hegemony.
Instead of extending hospitality that leaves intact the positions of host and guest with their
asymmetrical power relations, the aforementioned educators wrestle with the demands of
heterogeneous insiders.

To close, it is my contention that by paying attention to the needs and motivations of all
Theology students as insiders of somewhere, and by modelling inclusive ways of studying
the efforts of past generations in order to construct and critique proposals for the future,
educators can make a significant contribution to the flourishing of all in a religiously diverse
society.

References


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