

Courses and Curriculum

Developing Tertiary Religious Studies. Reflections On A Pedagogy in Process

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Introduction

The first full-time appointment to Religious Studies at the University of Waikato was made in February 1988.

Launched without fanfare, the University Calendar simply showed three courses in Religious Studies - one at Part I and two at Part II levels. Students by and large 'stumbled' across this new subject.

Arguably, the study of religion attempts two things: the understanding of particular religions from the standpoint of the believers or practitioners, so far as that is possible; and the identification and comprehension of the phenomenon/phenomena of religion as such. The overall pedagogical pattern involves a dynamic enquiry moving between the elucidation of historical and contemporary data; engaging in phenomenological description and comparative analysis; and undertaking philosophical and theological reflection.

Based on my experience of establishing a University programme I propose to offer some reflection on the process so far and sketch an outline of a developing pedagogy.

The Present Position

Today Religious Studies at the University of Waikato is a supporting subject for a first degree in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The programme begins at Part I, or first year, level with a full-year introductory study of the five major religious traditions of the world, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This course also aims at introducing the student to the academic study *per se* of religion.

A second Part I course, which is offered only in the second semester, comprises an introduction to religion in New Zealand. This course gives an introduction to classical Maori religion and Maori

responses to, and early variations on, the Christian religion. It also examines aspects of Christianity as the predominant religious tradition and surveys the other major religious traditions that are to be found in contemporary New Zealand life, as well as some of their significant variants and off-shoots.

Beyond Part I there are a number of courses which are offered on a rotational basis as regular advanced-level 'core' courses, and others which are offered either from time to time as resources permit, or as very occasional special topics. Most of these advanced level courses can be taken at either Part II or Part III level. At Part III only there is an additional option of undertaking a Directed Study.

Graduates in other subjects, or people with other suitable qualifications or experience, who want to take a specifically Religious Studies qualification, may enrol for the Diploma in Religious Studies. This is obtained by passing six undergraduate courses of which at least three must be at the Part III level.

The Process So Far

From a total undergraduate enrolment of 75 in the first year of operation, the 1989 enrolment jumped to 190 overall - most of these dividing equally between the two Part I courses. Religion in New Zealand was taught for the first time as the second Part I course.

The main innovation for 1989 was the commencement of 'double-offering' of advanced level courses - that is, most courses above Part I could be taken for either Part II credit, or Part III credit, but not both. Difference in assessment requirements allowed this to work. Together with related papers in other

departments, this course expansion was sufficient to launch plans for a Diploma in Religious Studies to commence in 1990.

An experiment with total semesterisation was another particular feature of 1989. However, this pattern revealed that it is not possible to take a course initially designed for teaching over the full academic year and squeeze it into a semester simply on the basis of doubling the weekly class-contact hours. As a semester course, major religions of the world were covered at the rate of one per fortnight!

Three other early developments also ought to be noted at this juncture. First, a research project, attracting a University funding grant, got underway. Second, the sixth biennial conference of the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religion was held at the University of Waikato. This included, as a discrete component, an international Jewish Studies Colloquium. Third, a series of occasional volumes of edited papers and monographs under the general title *Waikato Studies in Religion* was commenced.

The substantial increase in first year enrolments was eroded in 1990, largely because of two factors: the introduction of higher fees, and the reduction of a first degree from 22 to 21 papers. However, an overall enrolment pattern had emerged - in round figures for 1990, 100 at Part I; 24 at Part II; 16 at Part III - suggesting a healthy academic development was underway.

But the two most notable features of 1990 were the diversification of courses offered and an upsurge in supervision of research students. Total course semesterisation was abandoned on largely pedagogical grounds, although the Part I Religion in New Zealand paper was retained as a second semester option, and

two special topics at the advanced undergraduate level were taught by casual part-time staff, also as semester courses. In order to ensure the diploma regulations had a chance to operate fully, a Part III level Directed Study option was introduced attracting initially some seven enrolments. Thus, to all intents and purposes, it appeared that a very full programme - two courses at Part I, four at Part II and five at Part III - was being offered on the proverbial smell of an oily rag so far as the ratio of courses to staff was concerned. Co-supervision of two first masterate theses in Education, and two higher degrees (one in Education, one in History) comprised the other new challenging development in this the third year of operation. More significantly, however, was the enrolment of the first higher degree student in Religious Studies.

For various reasons, 1991 saw a reduction in the teaching programme, although overall student enrolments held. A change of government meant for the University of Waikato immediate and significant funding cuts, the imposition of enrolment ceilings, and the introduction of a new procedure of managed entry. For Religious Studies this meant no special topics were offered in 1991, and the advanced-level courses were cut back to just one, together with the Directed Study option. Nonetheless, this year saw two further significant developments. One was the commencement of Religious Studies as part of the University's Distance Education programme, the other was the milestone enrolment of the first Religious Studies doctoral candidate.

The Process So Far: Some Reflections

This brief review of the growth of a tertiary religious studies programme leads to the raises a number of implications and issues.

First, the underlying concern has been to ensure the academic integrity of the overall programme and the individual courses taught within it. In order to guarantee acceptability within an academic field the bona fides of any new development must be assured. This has been attempted, in this case, by aiming for a measure of coherence and consistency with course offerings at other New Zealand Universities. At the same time there has been a need to ensure that Waikato is not trying simply to emulate what is happening elsewhere. Specifically, for instance, the balance between universal scope and local context in the two Part I papers aims, in some measure, at achieving both acceptable coherence and appropriate distinctiveness.

Second, the issue of offering courses over the full academic year, versus a semester-only programme, is an ongoing one. It would seem that, on the whole, students need the span of a full academic year to cope with the new learnings involved in many Religious Studies courses. To do otherwise would imply some reduction in range and depth, but that suggests an unacceptable lowering of standards. Nonetheless, semesterisation does lend itself to appropriately tailored courses. Religion in New Zealand remains a second semester offering, for example, and it works. Some semesterisation is undoubtedly useful, even politically advantageous. Students like - even need - the opportunity to pick

up additional papers, or a change of course, in the second half of the year. Certainly the ability to offer the occasional advanced level special topic on a semester basis has proved a good policy move. But, if university politics favours full semesterisation, there are significant implications for matters such as the structure and content of individual courses and the overall pattern of the teaching programme into which they are to fit. This pedagogical issue continues to confront the ongoing development of Religious Studies, as well as most other subjects in the University.

Third, despite the growth and development of the academic programme, resource constraints have meant a delay in the appointment of a second full-time staff member. But the need for such an appointment is becoming ever more pressing, especially in respect of consolidating the development of the programme thus far and ensuring its ongoing integrity.

Fourth, the development of a teaching programme is not the only concern of a university lecturer. Certainly the nature of a foundational appointment calls for both an expansion of expertise, as well as a deepening of speciality. But teaching and research productivity are mutually required in the tertiary educational sector. Research directly supportive of the teaching programme has naturally occurred: research extending into new areas of investigation, has also been initiated. However, once again the need for appropriate staff expansion is highlighted.

Fifth, further volumes in the *Waikato Studies in Religion* series are in production, including a collection of papers arising from the Jewish Studies Colloquium. A third volume, on the theme of religious fundamentalism, is also in preparation.

Finally, the Diploma in Religious Studies, which saw its first two graduands in 1991, implies by virtue of its structure that a de facto major in Religious Studies is obtainable. This programme continues to attract a steady trickle of candidates and, together with degree-student interest, it suggests the present demand for Religious Studies as a supporting subject could translate to a small but significant demand for a full degree major.

To complete this review, some reflection on the meaning of the process for myself, as the one responsible for it, may be of some value. I have had sole responsibility for shaping and directing an entirely new academic development within a University - rather a unique experience. Many of the concerns that have been raised by this experience have been touched on already by the preceding analysis and reflection.

Coming from a background of academic specialisation in theology and philosophy, the move to Religious Studies meant, of course, both a demanding and stimulating expansion of academic focus, and a measure of loss, at least in the short term, of academic specialisation. It has also meant four years of very hard work to achieve the developments, as outlined above, whilst maintaining personal goals in respect of research and publication targets. There has been a sense of immense freedom and challenge, indeed an experience of privilege, in having had such a position and opportunity. At the same time the sense of responsibility and the inherent demand to achieve, perform, and produce, have weighed heavily.

However, I have attempted to come up with a guiding principle which articulates the undergirding focus of what I have tried to achieve throughout. In an age where mission statements are in vogue,

the statement that would seem most aptly applicable to the development of a tertiary Religious Studies programme would, for me, be something like:

To allay ignorance, and promote understanding, through appropriate teaching of religion and the fostering of a proper academic study of religion and religious phenomena.

A Pedagogy in Process

When considering the development of a Religious Studies programme *ab initio* as it were, the overall aims that I articulated in a 1988 memorandum were as follows:

- i) attend to the major religious traditions so far as possible;
- ii) provide a relevant contextual focus for the study of religious phenomena;
- iii) reflect the major (Judeo-Christian) tradition as appropriate to this part of the world;
- iv) to foster, where possible, an interdisciplinary approach;
- v) to promote the study of religion from a sound methodological basis, viz., phenomenological, comparative and contextual.

Working backwards through these original pedagogical aims, that of promoting the study of religion from a sound methodological basis emerges as the fundamental element so far as an educational philosophy is concerned. Reflected both in the teaching of particular courses, and in the structuring of the programme overall, the promotion of a phenomenologically-based methodology is both an aim in itself as well as a structural guide.

Thus, for example, the Part I course, Major Religions of the World, is taught on a fourfold modular basis. The first module, Introduction, comprises an overview that addresses questions such as - What is 'Re-

ligion'? What are the religions? The second module addresses aspects of foundational phenomena such as messengers and scriptures asking - How did the religions begin? What are their authority sources? and so on. The third comprises an historical survey that seeks to answer the questions - What happened? How did the religions get from their beginnings to the present day? Finally, the module called 'Expressions' looks at how religions function, how they find self-expression - What is believed? What is practised? and so on.

This broad classification introduces the student to phenomenological thinking and analysis. As well, it provides a useful means of gaining a comparative perspective in relation to these broad classification. It also allows for historical context to be taught as an integral part of a first encounter with a new religion. Hopefully it does justice to the overall aim of helping the student, at least in some preliminary sense, to see the necessary interconnection between the phenomenological, the historical, and the comparative approaches to the study of religion.

If methodology is the first element in a religious studies pedagogy, then it would seem the second element would echo the initial original aim, viz, to attend to the major religious traditions so far as possible, together with an appropriate bias in favour of the dominant religious tradition familiar to the world of the students - which was the third of the original aims. At the Part II level the introductory study of the religious traditions of China and Japan reflects both a widening of scope in respect of the religions of the world, and affirms an appropriate regionalisation and geographic relevance. Judaism, Christianity and Islam receive more advanced and detailed treatment in two specialised

courses whilst Comparative Studies in Religion builds directly on the Part I papers. Both methodological development, therefore, as well as appropriate coverage of the major traditions, are catered for in the teaching programme as it has developed thus far.

But another dimension, that of local heritage or context, was highlighted by the need to effect the second of the original aims, namely the provision of a relevant contextual focus for the study of religious phenomena. This has required particular attention. It has been a matter of giving right attention to the religious context into which the major world traditions have come. And in New Zealand that means taking account of Maori religion both as the primary contextual reference and as an example of primal religion in its own right. This has provided one of the critical dimensions for the development of the second Part I course, Religion in New Zealand. The interaction between an incoming missionary religion and the host primal religion is pertinent to understanding religion in the local context, and it provides also an example of the phenomenon of New Religious Movements, a significant area of study in its own right. Thus attention to appropriate contextual focus forms a third pedagogical element in respect of the educational philosophy guiding the development of the teaching programme.

A fourth element is found in the inter-disciplinary aim, viz, to foster, where possible, cross- and multi- disciplinary approaches to the study of religion in tandem with the discipline-specific phenomenological and comparative methods. At Waikato this has been effected, primarily, by adding to the Religious Studies course offerings papers taught from within other disciplines. Thus Ritual and

Religion, Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion and, from the English department, Biblical and Classical backgrounds may all be taken for Religious Studies credit at Part II and/or Part III levels.

Conclusion

To summarise, the educational philosophy that has both emerged from, and yet also guided the development of, the Religious Studies programme at Waikato has comprised four elements - methodology, content, context, and inter-disciplinary range.

Attention to methodology has yielded the recognition that the study of religion involves a dynamic enquiry centred on the concept of religion as phenomena. Historical enquiry, phenomenological analysis and description, and the comparative contrast of commonalities and distinctives, form the bedrock of the pedagogical process.

This process engages the substantive content of religious traditions, so matters of appropriate scope and focus of content comprise the second element of the pedagogical process. Questions as to which traditions are included and to what extent they are covered are answered in the interaction of methodological and content concerns. But these answers are not forged in an ivory tower vacuum.

Contextual relevance weighs in as the third element, both in underscoring the validity of the selection of major traditions at the introductory stage, and the development of more regionally specific advanced courses.

Finally, the matter of inter-disciplinary range is implicitly addressed in the first instance by the inclusion of adjunct

courses offering a wider diversity of choice to the student than would otherwise be the case. But the justification for the inclusion of such courses is on the grounds that religion is a complex phenomena that yields to a variety of disciplinary approaches. Indeed a single disciplinary focus is likely to lead to a narrowing of understanding and a limitation of critical appreciation.

However, even from within the discipline of Religious Studies itself, there comes a point when historical and phenomenological heuristics must necessarily lead to deeper issues of a philosophical, even theological, nature. Critical appreciation born of comparative study must eventually allow for a searching critique once

the groundwork of empathetic understanding is laid. Prospects for dialogical enquiry and hermeneutical reflection must be allowed for in the ongoing development of the programme. Beyond combating ignorance and prejudice with clear knowledge and sound method, there must needs be opportunity to probe the deeper critical questions of truth and meaning both from within and between the religious systems. From the first encounter with religions and religious studies to a specialised focus on an issue or theme, the overall pedagogical process should, ideally, carry the enquirer into ever deeper layers of comprehension and critical reflection.

