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Fifty years of *Religious Studies*

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STEWART SUTHERLAND

The founding editor of *Religious Studies*, some fifty years ago, was Professor H. D. Lewis, then Professor of History and Philosophy of Religion at King's College, London. Volume 1 number 1 was published in October 1965. The editorial board was a *Who's Who* of the academic study of religion and religions in the UK and the editorial advisory team straddled the world from Yale to Benares.

It was a good beginning and the range of articles in the first two numbers contained some classics, for example, H. H. Price on belief 'in' and belief 'that', and R. W. Hepburn on 'Questions about the meaning of life'.

I have no doubt that bringing a journal of this standing to birth required someone of Lewis's drive and commitment. He was someone who never gave up a cause that he believed right, whether in university politics, or academic argument. He was also someone who was fearless in the face of disagreement. On this latter point John Hick characterized him once, albeit affectionately, as 'Hywel contra mundum'. Indeed he could be quite ruthless in the discipline he expected from junior colleagues.

On the other hand this same drive demonstrated itself positively within the arcane theological politics of King's College, and the even more gothic structures of the University of London, in the creation of an undergraduate degree and degree programme in religious studies.

In some ways he was a philosopher fallen amongst theologians. Son of a well-known Welsh preacher, he had strong religious convictions of his own. This

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apparently conformed to the outward face of the King's College of those days, but he was after all a Welsh 'non-conformist' philosopher fallen amongst theologians and a college establishment which still had place in the Anglican hierarchy of the time – and what is more he was Welsh-speaking! Nonetheless he was warmly supported in his endeavours by several King's colleagues on the first editorial board, notably Eric Mascall and Geoffrey Parrinder.

There was a whiff of academic fiefdom about his reign, and at a second meeting of the editorial board, Donald MacKinnon prefaced his contribution to discussion thus: 'When this Board last met six years and three months ago . . .' – a point made and accepted, or so MacKinnon told me!

Apart from the virtues necessary to help mould the development of religious studies as a discipline in his College and *Religious Studies* as a leading academic journal in the wider community, he could also be very gracious, and I have surprised more than one of those who knew his other side by reassuring them that Lewis never leant over the shoulder of his successor, whether as Head of Department, or eventual Editor of *Religious Studies*. He knew how to hand over his most cherished academic children.

All the while of course he remained an inspiring teacher and fluent contributor to the philosophical discussion of religion of his day.

It is worth recalling, that in the early 1960s, the idea of religious studies as a discipline was not well defined, nor indeed well accepted by the more traditional theological disciplines of the day.

The work of German theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the nature and origins of religion were reasonably well known in the English-speaking world, but they had not found many disciples in the polarized worlds of faculties of arts and faculties of divinity.

In the United Kingdom at the time, and to some extent in North America, there were three strands of thought representing different approaches to what became 'religious studies'.

One was well typified by Geoffrey Parrinder. It consisted of an appreciation of the strength and universal reach of non-western religions, and was essentially a scholarly and/or popular attempt to understand them and their place in the firmament of religious belief, from within the Christian tradition. At its best it was scholarly and informed by good intentions. It was also innovative. It was however, seen as an approach best described as 'Comparative Religion'.

The second strand is best represented by the achievements of Ninian Smart, who broke the stricter theological moulds in the creation of an *ab initio* department of religious studies in the new post-Robbins University of Lancaster. It was characterized by bringing a wider range of academic armoury to the study of religions, complementing the strengths of textual, historical, and philosophical analysis with the techniques of the social sciences.

This was all in the context of developing a firmer definition and appreciation of the place of the concept of empathy in engaging with 'other' cultural traditions.

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Both Parrinder and Smart were founding members of the editorial board, and early contributors to the journal. At that time a third characteristic approach to the study of religious traditions was being explored by John Hick, who joined the editorial board in due course. His initial reputation depended upon more traditional contributions to the philosophy of religion, specifically, in religious epistemology and in his work on the problem(s) of evil. However, he began to engage more fully with non-Christian religions, and this led him in part to look for common cores of belief between the major world religions. I have no doubt that all of this owed a great deal to his sensitivity as a Professor who was an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, living, working, and thinking, in a city (Birmingham, England) that was being reshaped culturally by significant and successful immigrant communities.

These were, crudely sketched, the intellectual contexts in which both the journal and the discipline of religious studies were being formed in the second half of the twentieth century.

One great lacuna in this development, for which all of us bear some responsibility, is the lack of projection of these apparently arcane academic preoccupations into the wider fields of policy and community awareness. I recently halted a senior politician in full flow as he referred again and again to 'suicide' bombers, and pointed out that they regarded themselves as martyrs rather than depressives. Should this not alter the ways in which policy and its implementation took form? He said that he took my point and then demonstrated that he did not by continuing in exactly the same vein. Now this is one small example of how the sensitivities necessary for religious study have failed to take due place centre stage in both world and community politics. Those of us in the academic fields in question have unfinished business here. The issues are now front-page material, from school curriculum to wars in the Middle East.

My final comments return to something with which the journal and the practice of philosophy of religion collide from time to time, the parallel trajectories of philosophy of religion and Christian apologetics. The first issue of the journal, for example, published an article by Ian Ramsey, titled 'Contemporary philosophy and Christian faith'.

I simply want to leave on the table three major unresolved issues for Christian theology upon which philosophical reflection is necessary, and which would also be relevant to non-Christian traditions.

The first, for which I do not believe there is a final or even adequate intellectual answer, is the clutch of issues which arise from the evident presence of evil in the world.

The second is the awareness of the presence, influence, and history of a multiplicity of religious traditions. Is there a convincing Christian or indeed Islamic understanding of this? Is such an understanding inevitably hierarchical and/or divisive in character?

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We cannot all be right, though we might all be equally, or at best unequally, wrong. Or, more radically, does openness of approach and conclusion to these questions inevitably lead to apostasy?

The final issue is one with which Christianity has struggled since some forms of it became established within political structures. What is a healthy relationship between Christianity and politics? This penetrates deep into contemporary society. Consider education within England as a key example: Is the 1944 Education Act an adequate settlement of the presence of Christianity in our schools (Churchill referred to it as 'the County Council Creed'!)? What of the sensitivities of fundamentalist Christians or Muslims about the content and style of sex education? And, of course recent reports about Governing Bodies in Birmingham schools open up the whole issue of the place of religious faith in influencing the ethos of schools as well as the wider question of the grounds for the acceptability of Faith Schools.

Broader questions about the place, if any, of Sharia law are certainly not finally resolved, and should one of our arms of Government, the House of Lords, have automatic membership of twenty-six Bishops of the Church of England? And anyway, what is an Established Church?

We are a long way from the Genevan concept of theocracy in the west, but evidently not in the Middle East.

All of the above would benefit from the analytic skills of philosophy, as well as from an informed awareness of the diversities, similarities, and histories of major world religions.

Over to you, Editor!

KEITH WARD

I co-edited *Religious Studies* with Peter Byrne for seven years, from 1991 to 1997. As we said in our first editorial, 'it will take two philosophers to continue the work of Stewart Sutherland'. It did, but when I began to transform into a sort of theologian I resigned and left the journal in Peter's very capable hands.

In preparing this short reminiscence I spent a few happy hours in the subterranean caverns of the Bodleian Library, reading through the articles submitted in those years. My main impression was of the very high quality of the published articles, and of how they are still fully relevant to and important for current discussions in the philosophy of religion. In fact I had a strong feeling that if anyone had the energy, it would be a valuable research resource to have the articles collected and cross-referenced by topic, to form an essential research basis for future projects. This has partly been done, especially by the introduction of abstracts of the articles. But there is more that could be done to ensure that this work is not simply lost in archival space.

A second impression was of the almost wholly analytical and Judaeo-Christian basis of the articles. This may not be a disadvantage, as the journal has an

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outstanding reputation in analytical philosophy of religion. But I remember how difficult it was to attract articles which were not concerned with Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism – even though many articles were concerned to make negative points about these traditions. In the initial statement of intent when the journal was founded, it was hoped to attract 'classical and contemporary debate from varied traditions', to be a forum for debate in the study of religions, and to publish work in the psychology and sociology of religion, where this was of general interest. I must admit that I never managed to live up to that intention. There was very little work published in Process philosophy, in feminist or 'post-modern' thought, in Idealism or neo-Thomism, in Phenomenology, in Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim philosophy, or in the 'study of religions'. This was, I think, due to the sort of articles that were submitted, as well as to their very high quality, which made selection for publication very difficult. I do not mention this as a criticism, but simply as a fact. Looking at the thing historically, it is remarkable how completely Idealism, which would have dominated the English-language scene in the early twentieth century, disappeared. It is noteworthy how little social or historical contextualization of philosophical discussion there was. The philosophical debates might just have dropped from heaven, with no connection to contemporary events or to issues of current concern in actual religious life at all. And it is slightly ironic that the most prominent intellectual virtues were those of precision and clarity, which the founding editor notoriously and repeatedly had argued were 'not enough'.

Nevertheless, these are virtues. Precision of definition, rigour of argument, and conceptual clarity, are unfortunately rare in religion. Openness to, and indeed expectation of, critical argument, acceptance of diversity of view, and attempts to be fair in stating the views of others, are virtues often under attack in English-speaking cultures. A journal which attempts to celebrate and encourage them is of crucial importance. If I could have searched for more historical and cultural relevance, I am proud of having helped to sustain a journal which stands for the virtues of free, open, and reasoned discussion and analysis in religion, and which insists that religious beliefs are amenable to and call for the exercise of reason, understanding, and wisdom at the highest level. I hope and expect that *Religious Studies* will continue to flourish as a beacon of empathetic and informed critical enquiry in a violent and intolerant world.

PETER BYRNE

It is a pleasure to be associated with the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of this journal, especially as I was involved in the production of *Religious Studies* for some twenty-four years.

My first acquaintance with *Religious Studies* dates from 1972, when I began to consult it as a graduate student. When I joined King's College London in 1975 as a Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion I was very much aware of its importance

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in the working life of Prof. H. D. Lewis, then Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion and the journal's founding editor. My own formal involvement with *Religious Studies* began in the session 1986–1987, when I became Assistant Editor under Stewart Sutherland. I became joint Editor with Keith Ward in the academic year 1990–1991 and sole Editor in 1997–1998. I edited the journal (with capable help on book reviews from Martin Stone and then Christopher Hamilton and in copy-editing from Mrs Charlotte Byrne) from 1997–1998 until November 2010.

As Assistant Editor back in 1986–1987 my role was to read all submissions to the journal and decide which were worth sending to referees and which deserved only the dreaded news that 'while your paper is of considerable interest in itself, *Religious Studies* receives many more submissions than it can possibly publish and must reject some papers that are otherwise of merit'. (Thus the hypocrisy of editors.) I can therefore say that I read every single submission to the journal over a twenty-four-year period – apart from the ones I simply threw in the bin. Over that long period there were considerable changes in both the nature and quantity of submission to *Religious Studies*. I offer a few reflections on these changes in what follows.

When H. D. Lewis founded *Religious Studies* he intended to launch a general journal in religion, in whose pages articles on the philosophy of religion would appear alongside ones in the history and social scientific study of religion. Going back to the early numbers, from the original volume 1 number 1 of October 1965, one finds a fair sprinkling of such articles alongside those in the philosophy of religion. By the time I had become Assistant Editor this fair sprinkling had all but dried up. This change was so marked that when Keith Ward and I took over the journal at the end of the calendar year 1990, the then commissioning editor from Cambridge University Press, the wise and ever-helpful Penny Carter, insisted that *Religious Studies* formally take on the identity of a journal in the philosophy of religion. It was she who prescribed the addition of the journal's subtitle: '*an International Journal in the Philosophy of Religion*'. There is a variety of reasons why H. D. Lewis's original intent could not be maintained. From the outset articles in philosophy of religion outnumbered those from other branches of the study of religion, and I hazard that historians of religion never regarded *Religious Studies* as a major outlet for their work. Thus the stage was set for the squeezing out of non-philosophical contributions to the journal. It is worth emphasizing here the inherent tendency of research in modern universities to become more and more specialized and thus the growing inability of academic subdisciplines to communicate one with another. If it be thought that there is some significant failure in the fact that *Religious Studies* could not be maintained as a general journal in religion, ask yourself how many journals there are which publish between the one set of covers first-rate research articles across the many subdisciplines of a modern department of religious studies.

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Alongside this gradual but marked shift of the journal to one for philosophers of religion, we can also see in its pages from 1965 to the present a record of considerable change in the character of philosophy of religion itself. My first taste of the subject came through taking an undergraduate course in it in 1969 whilst studying at the University of York. The course had three main components: the proofs of natural theology, the problem of evil, and religious language. The religious language section did not have as its focus analogy and the construal of predicates describing the divine nature. These were the exciting days when discussions of logical empiricist critiques of the intelligibility of religious discourse were still the height of fashion. John Wisdom, I. T. Ramsey, and the John Hick of 'Theology and Verification' were our undergraduate meat and drink. Metaphysics was a problem then, but writers in the philosophy of religion now glory in it. The seemingly endless stream of articles on the divine nature and attributes of the last twenty years is witness to its heady rebirth and to the banishing of logical positivist nightmares from the philosophical mind. While the proofs remain as perennial topics of interest, religious epistemology has been transformed with attacks on evidentialism and the emergence of forms of Christian philosophy. This last strand in contemporary philosophy of religion reflects a growth of interest in the subject in North America. With that has come a significant shift in contributors from this side of the Atlantic to the other.

I could bore readers with many more pages on how *Religious Studies* looks different in 2015 from my first acquaintance with it in 1972 – but I won't. I close by recording my sense (I have no hard-and-fast figures to hand) of a considerable increase in submissions to the journal over the period of my twenty-four-year involvement with it. Many readers of this journal will not be aware of this, but there was a time when academics did not have personal computers. Back in the bad old days intending contributors were required to send in three hard copies to the Assistant Editor – by snail mail of course. What a lot of time at a typewriter was represented in this requirement! And it might have to be paid for. Changes demanded by referees or editors would involve retyping and the whole process could take many, many months. Submission to a journal entailed a degree of effort and commitment which is unknown to the cosseted inhabitants of the electronic age. Moreover, there was considerably less pressure to publish in the first place. In that respect, academic life was easier and more relaxed in the first years of this journal than it is now. Young teachers could expect to get lectureships/assistant professorships with no or minimal publications. Both journal and book publishing have exploded during the lifetime of *Religious Studies* as the professional expectations of university teachers have been transformed.

I am confident that this journal's next fifty years will be as distinguished and prosperous as its first and I wish all those now involved in its production and management well in its continued career.

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