

## Teaching Religion in Early Modern Studies

**Colin Brooks** (Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology) and **Jonathan Gibson** (English Subject Centre) report on an event held at the University of Manchester on Friday November 20 2006.

### **Introduction:**

This meeting was suggested and organized by two members of the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester, Dr Crawford Gribben from English & American Studies and Dr Jeremy Gregory from Religions & Theology, together with Dr. Michael Brown, then of the Department of History, Trinity College, Dublin and now of the Department of History, University of Aberdeen. It was supported by three of the Higher Education Academy's Subject Centres -- those for English (<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk>), for History, Classics and Archaeology (<http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk>), and for Philosophical and Religious Studies (<http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk>). It was held in the impressive surroundings of the University of Manchester's Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning.

The day was made up of six brief presentations which provoked discussion, reflection and debate. 46 people attended, including a number of Manchester MA students, whose contributions from the floor gave a valuable student's-eye perspective. As the popularity of the event showed, religion is now at the heart of the research and teaching of many early modernists - due, in large part, to the flowering of Reformation history over the past two decades or so, a development which has helped reshape the priorities of early modern specialists in cognate disciplines. One of the speakers in Manchester, indeed, referred to religion as early modern scholarship's currently preferred means of 'articulating' the period as a whole.

The topics discussed in the presentations were:

- Secularism, Fundamentalism and the Teaching of Early Modern Religion (Dr. Jeremy Gregory)
- Teaching the Reformation (Prof. Peter Marshall, Warwick, and Prof. Alex Walsham, Exeter)
- Teaching Religious Literature (Prof. Brian Cummings, Sussex, and Prof. Helen Wilcox, Bangor)
- Teaching Religious Ideas (Prof. Alan Ford, Nottingham, and Dr. Lucy Wooding, London)
- Teaching Religious Institutions and Communities (Dr. Graeme Murdock, Birmingham, and Dr. Sandra Hynes, Dublin)

Dr. Michael Brown offered a series of concluding reflections.

## The Student Experience:

The assumption at the time of planning the colloquium was that a key matter would be the contrast between contemporary student interest in religion and systems of belief (and, consequently, of action), and student ignorance of the practice and theology of Christianity in the early modern era (say, ca.1500 to ca.1700). This assumption proved in practice to be unfounded. Recent world events appeared to have been less provocative of student interest than had been imagined. On the other hand, contributors painted a by no means bleak picture of student knowledge and understanding of past cultures. One of the key features of the discussion was the teasing out of the circumstances in which student interest and knowledge (and, indeed, student faith) might be drawn out, encouraged and put to good academic (and beyond that, perhaps, civic) use.

Jeremy Gregory, reflecting on his own experience of teaching in a variety of institutions, noted the considerable variation in student approach both between institutions and over time. In the 1980s and 90s, he argued, the majority of student he had taught had been areligious, anti-religious and post-Christian. More recently, he said, students had become increasingly confident in confronting the implications of such labels and, in approaching these subjects without preconceptions, were showing themselves to be more flexible, more understanding, than the previous generation. Dogmatism, of all kinds, is waning. Nevertheless, today's students still need to be encouraged to feel at ease with other perspectives, other convictions: higher education requires engagement with others and 'the other', and there is evidence that students are still, Dr. Gregory said, 'afraid of hurting each other's feelings'. To Brian Cummings, 'post-ideological' students were not necessarily exponents of deadened, pragmatic learning: in their engagement with Shakespeare, for example, they were proving themselves 'better readers and more historically informed critics'.

There was a general agreement that one could spot a Christian Union member in a seminar group, but also a degree of anxiety about this: just as today's students are less likely than before to stereotype past peoples, tutors should not stereotype their students. Everyone agreed that student commitment to a particular faith provided a challenge, but also that it could be positively harnessed. Secularist assumptions were being questioned by students: this did not imply adherence to any particular faith. That process of questioning is facilitated in institutions with a diverse student body, something that seems to nurture both confidence and a questioning interest. Experiences from various colleges of the University of London suggested that the presence of students personally committed to a religious faith could be a positive advantage for class discussions: it helped students to surmount the timorous and apologetic approach which they often adopted as a defensive strategy. Diversity of faith and culture among students could be productive of common interest and debate not of defensiveness or of (perhaps pretended) indifference. One participant remembered that seminars went well in Singapore, where students 'asked unashamedly naïve questions'. Amongst contemporary students in the UK, there might be as much reluctance to expose ignorance as to reveal knowledge--though the value of ignorance in encouraging an open-minded engagement with the past was highlighted. Participants felt that it was important both for tutors to find the right register for student response and to be 'upfront' about matters of faith. One speaker found that his students, confronted by material and arguments about belief, faith and practice, positively relished the opportunity to suspend their habitual 'pose of disbelief'. Another participant suggested, not entirely jocularly, that UCAS forms should include information about students' religious beliefs--registering spiritual skills alongside other types of prowess, such as skill in musical performance. In his concluding remarks, Michael Brown took a rather less sunny view, reminding us of the potential clash between academic study and student faith: study of 'the other' becomes 'a threat if you have the solace of community and the conviction of salvation'. But then such tension might be no bad thing in the context of higher education.

Peter Marshall and Alex Walsham agreed that students could be put off modules by certain titles ('Reformation and Religious Change, 1470-1558'; 'Reformation Europe'). On the other hand, there was considerable agreement that students were particularly interested in such topics as 'Popular Religion: Society and the Super-natural' and particularly confident in dealing with irrationality. Confidence was a crucial matter. Students might well feel a lack of confidence alongside a fascination with modules dealing with such topics. They were not a 'safe choice', especially at level three when so much seemed at stake in terms of degree classification. But that might equally mean that only the more confident (and, perhaps, able) students would choose such options. There was a sense, too, that a number of modules appealed to, and benefited from the presence of, students who had some awareness of anthropology, or of Lacanian theory, and who were willing to embrace novel schemes of periodization. There was some discussion, as well, of the gender balance of students taking particular modules: Alex Walsham reported that 'Reformation Europe' attracted males and females in equal measure; 'Society and the Supernatural' seemed to be particularly appreciated by females. This seemed an interesting area for further investigation.

Student feedback was varied, and many participants had revealing anecdotes to tell. Student opinion could be vigorously expressed: attention devoted to *The Pilgrim's Progress* was regretted by one student who considered it 'sloppy, badly written and obvious'. 'Too much religion' complained another. Peter Marshall had compiled and made available a glossary of religious terms, only one student had gone out of the way to acquire a copy; students elsewhere, too, had been concerned by the apparent difficulty of the terminology. There seem to be grounds for the creation of a web resource here.

### **Institutional structures:**

Institutional structures were acknowledged to be of central importance. Religious issues may be taught in departments of History, Literature (often 'English') or Theology. In institutions without a simple and overarching framework for taught programmes, there may be considerable variation in, for example, assessment and even credit regulations between departments, variations which would limit the opportunities for students to engage in a variety of approaches to the study of religion. And institutions vary in the extent to which they encourage or require, or allow, students to enrol in a module offered by a different department from that of the student's major subject. Teaching, say, 'The Reformation' would be a very different matter if all the students were enrolled for Theology degrees or if they included historians, literature students - or sociologists. Alan Ford pointed out that this was not only an issue for student learning: he held a chair in a Theology department but had never himself studied Theology. Other examples could be offered. The perspectives, the rich multi-disciplinary background, brought to a particular department by a faculty member might come up against the structural, methodological and curricular conventions of the department concerned. Participants also mentioned the important distinction between 'core' and 'optional' courses: the presence in the latter of students whose preference had been for another, often radically different, option is, it was felt, rarely helpful.

The discussion did not focus explicitly on questions of assessment. There was, though, a sense that in practice teaching involved, perhaps necessitated, a variety of approaches, whereas 'normality' still ruled in matters of assessment. It was not clear whether this was a matter of the choice of individual faculty or a consequence of institutional or faculty structures. The value of non-assessed, 'formative' essays as opportunities for students to experiment with complex ideas was highlighted. The period under discussion was one of considerable experiment in cultural forms and modes of expression: we should nurture a variety of forms of teaching and assessment, and encourage risk taking.

Several speakers pointed to the significance of the periodization used by departments in organizing their curricula. 'Early modern' is not a neutral term, nor an obvious one. A prior

understanding of 'late medieval' might be more than desirable, might be essential, for a student of the Reformation. Brian Cummings cast this issue in a rather different light, demonstrating how departmental curricula tended to be packaged in ways that followed disciplinary fashion. He reflected on the implications of this for the study of religious themes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. For many years, English literature courses did not include any 'Reformation' (*strictu sensu*) literature at all. This led Professor Cummings to argue that the problem which we were discussing was in many ways one created by the disciplinary community (in his case, English) rather than by the students. Students in that discipline were 'open and curious'; faculty were in thrall to academic fashion and to personal predispositions. Alan Fox in part agreed: tutors were now having to question whether 'non-belief' was an 'objective stance', having, in the previous generation, all too often taken it for granted as the natural position.

### **The Strangeness of the Past:**

Historical context, a sense that the past is a different country, was generally agreed to be crucial, even for text-based modules in which the richness of the material examined might appear to make it self-sufficient. The very public significance of theological and religious issues in the contemporary world made that appreciation of difference the more important. Contemporary 'fundamentalism' and the assumptions which appear to underlie it, could not simply be read back into the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Early modern meaning and understandings are not ours. Yet the term 'early modern' itself covers a multiplicity of belief and practice – and language: it is hard for students to grasp essentials when they were examining a world in flux. Some participants noted a tendency among students to retreat into cynicism when confronted with such rapidly shifting categories and values.

On the other hand, teaching, while recognizing difference, often had to start by 'translating' the past into something understandable by the student in 2006: Helen Wilcox commented that students would 'shamelessly draw on parallels with their own experience'. That brought problems in its wake but provided a route which it was almost inevitable that tutors had to take. One of Professor Wilcox's own teaching strategies is to explore the parallels between Donne's *Devotions* and contemporary student blogs. Other methods mentioned included field trips, to holy sites as well as 'symbol-spotting' tours of the National Gallery. Consideration of the role of 'place' in learning about early modern life is something that might well be addressed at another discussion.

The study of 'religion' in the early modern era very often requires students to look beyond an individual country. Yet students are, because of their lack of competence or confidence in foreign languages, tempted to concentrate on English-speaking areas. Textbooks and commentaries provide excellent secondary material and some translated primary sources: but these are often insufficient in scope to sustain a level three undergraduate dissertation. On another occasion, we have heard modernists comment on the comparative success of medievalists in persuading their students to equip themselves with the foreign language skills necessary for textual study. Graeme Murdock discussed his use of translations of Genevan Consistory Court cases to get his students inside the various characters (backsliders, disciplinarians....) appearing therein: students are allocated different roles from meeting to meeting and, he thinks, 'enjoy mastering idiosyncratic ideas'.

The combination of student knowledge and student experience works in various ways: one of the aims of a Theology degree, for example, might be to help students put their learning into an 'overarching whole', to create their own theology through direct engagement with that of others. Personal development of a related sort happens on English and History programmes too, of course, but it is much less likely to be explicitly planned for by the lecturer.

## **Summary:**

Differences between the teaching practices of the three disciplines represented emerged repeatedly during the day's discussions--persistently bubbling up whatever the notional session topic, sometimes, it seemed, taking participants by surprise. For this reason, the meeting, which excavated a great deal of common ground and provided colleagues from cognate disciplines with a uniquely valuable chance to exchange ideas, was perhaps more a 'multidisciplinary' than an 'interdisciplinary' event. In his concluding remarks, Michael Brown suggested that the day had revealed English lecturers to be rather more optimistic about the current state of affairs, in particular about their students' mental agility, than their Historian counterparts. Historians had, perhaps, to work harder at teasing out potential. With considerable force, he went on to argue that we need to take into account the ability of religion to offend, to bring in its wake blood and hatred: a theme, it goes without saying, of pressing contemporary importance, and a good starting point, perhaps, for a future event.

## **Feedback from Participants:**

The informality of the day and the simple point idea that papers were intended to promote and provide discussion was much appreciated: "experienced practitioners sharing ideas, hints and best practice... Excellent collegiate atmosphere, networking/intellectual discussion..."

There was considerable comment on inter-disciplinarity. It was thought "very interesting to discover how different departments/institutions are approaching the idea of interdisciplinarity". Some argued that the discussions had concentrated on cross-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary work. That the boundaries of disciplines were respected was appreciated. The appetite for cross- and inter-disciplinary discussion was evident: "really appreciate 'interdisciplinary' events", "anything interdisciplinary".

As to pedagogic practice, the discussion of ideas on teaching strategies was appreciated though a number of participants thought that they could with profit have been confronted directly. An over-dependence on anecdote in our discussion of, e.g., student feedback, was noted by one participant who urged the need for a more rigorous analysis of teaching practice. One participant thought that "historians dominated" the discussions; others called for more input from historical theology, and more examination of the interface between Eng. Lit. and the teaching of religious ideas.

The suggestions for organizational improvement included a number that reflect continuing problems for organizers of events such as this: we try to ensure a rounded programme, with time for discussion – and in practice there is so much to say and to discuss that it easily appears that the programme was over-loaded, with too little time for discussion. We will certainly endeavour to allow more group discussion in future. What is needed is to encourage participants in reflecting on the specific topics under discussion also to begin to shape ideas for future events. Participants also called for the deliberate inclusion of more under- and post-graduates at such events.

Participants suggested a range of further events. Some concentrated on approaches to teaching and learning: for example, on 'Improving Students' Information Literacy' and on 'Improving students' ability to read' (perhaps rather than to use) material.. Calls for a discussion on how one should engage 'The Post-Ideological, Post-Theoretical Student' perhaps go alongside a request for further discussion on the need to challenge 'Pragmatism and Marks-based learning'. Other comments sought events on specific aspects of our disciplines: for example on 'the body, corporeality and interiority' or on gender. The need to include colleagues from fine art and from music in similar discussions was pointed out. Finally, one participant urged a discussion of the health of Medieval and Early Modern

History in HE in the face of the dominance of Modern History in secondary education: this was perhaps particularly directed at History but there are obvious parallels here with English.

**Conclusion:**

We would like to thank the organisers for providing the impetus, and the University of Manchester for providing the facilities, for so interesting a day of discussion. Plans are being developed to hold a similar event dealing with 'modern studies'. And we would be pleased to hear from colleagues who would like to take forward the ideas for future discussions mentioned above – or others.

Colin Brooks ([C.Brooks@arts.gla.ac.uk](mailto:C.Brooks@arts.gla.ac.uk)) and Jonathan Gibson ([Jonathan.Gibson@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Gibson@rhul.ac.uk)).