Report:
Breaking Down the Classroom Walls:
Innovative Teaching and Learning Methods in
Religious Studies and Theology—
Some Perspectives from the University of
Wales

Sophie Gilliat-Ray
Religious and Theological Studies
Cardiff University

Current and past members of staff of the University of Wales will no doubt have good memories of spending enjoyable quality time at 'Gregynog', the University's conference centre near Newtown in Mid-Wales. We are privileged in the University to have such a beautiful setting and such excellent facilities for a conference centre. Twice each year, the departments of Religious Studies and Theology across Wales come together to Gregynog for a conference, once in November for students, and then again in June for staff and postgraduates. This article emerges as one of the outcomes of the 24-hour conference for staff held in June 2002.

During the academic year 2001-2002, it was the responsibility of the Department of Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff to organise the programme for both conferences, and the PRS-LTSN made a significant investment and input to each, for which we are grateful. The existence of the subject centre was a catalyst for inspiring the theme of 'Teaching and Learning' for both colloquia during the year.

On previous occasions, the conferences for both staff and students generally had an 'open' theme. This tended to result in the delivery of diverse and usually unconnected academic papers which, certainly in our current times, students might actually prefer to download from the Internet! As a way of making the expense, time and effort required for staff and students to travel long distances across Wales for a relatively short period seem more worthwhile, I decided to initiate a focused theme of 'Teaching and Learning' for both events. Thanks to

the efforts of colleagues from across the University of Wales who shared their expertise and experience, both conferences became more interactive, required more active and engaged participation, and focused upon some of the methods and technologies of delivering and assessing the curriculum. Perhaps above all, the value of the conferences was the opportunity for learning with one another and sharing good practice, and it exemplified just the approach to teaching our students that this article advocates. As the pressure and workload upon staff and students increases, there is rarely time or opportunity left over to reflect upon what it is we are trying to teach or learn, why we are learning/teaching it, and how teaching and learning might be made more effective. In the light of this, the theme of the 2001-2002 conferences was deliberately structured to create spaces for reflection and conversation.

Part of the focus for the student conference in November was the use of the internet in teaching and learning in Religious Studies and Theology. Thanks to the input of Jeff Dubberly and Eva De Visscher (authors of the RDN web sites 'Internet Religious Studies' and 'Internet Theologian' respectively), students were able to have an online demonstration of resources available online. Reflecting afterwards on the way students responded to these and other sessions, it became clear that at least part of the staff and postgraduate conference later in the year might usefully consider some of the implications and possibilities of 'non-traditional' resources for teaching, especially those derived from popular culture.

This paper therefore explores some of the pedagogical issues and problems that arise as a consequence of the fact that it is no longer sufficient to teach via the fairly limited range of 'traditional' and often very passive teaching methods of academe. Delivering a formal lecture, week after week, may have once been the hallmark of academic teaching competence, but much more is now required of us as educators. The emergence of the LTSN and its related subject centres, and the creation of subject-specific journals such as *Teaching Theology and Religion* reflect a growing interest in pedagogical issues in higher education in general and in Religious Studies and Theology in particular. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education benchmarking statements for Theology and Religious Studies (2000) also challenge the 'traditional lecture' as a teaching tool, and suggests that more interactive classes which make use of other media might be more appropriate. Better understanding of what makes for good learning on the part of students (thanks in part to the extensive research of those connected, for example, with the Oxford

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Brookes Centre for Staff Development) has been a catalyst for experimentation and exploration of innovative teaching methods and technologies. As a consequence, we are now expected to be much more creative and technologically sophisticated and competent. By using the technologies of the internet, film, or music we begin to meet a growing expectation on the part of students that they will be taught by individuals who are thinking about new and innovative methods of delivering the curriculum. If nothing else, through reflective teaching we set an example of professional practice that students will take with them into future employment.

The Changing Face of Religion

There are a growing number of multi-media resources available for teaching about religion, especially through the Internet. This serves as a substantive counter to the claims of some sociologists who argue that religion is losing significance in contemporary life (Bruce 2002). Although traditional techniques for 'measuring' religion might indicate patterns of decline, there is an alternative view that suggests that religions are flexibly responding to adapt to new circumstances. It is arguable that religion is being re-located out of 'traditional' spheres to new contexts where it then takes new shapes and appears in different guises. Religion is alive and well on the Internet, for example. Charles Henderson, executive director of the Association of Religion and Intellectual Life, following the announcement of the 1999 Academy Award nominations claimed that he could not "remember a year when God figured so prominently in the [Oscars]"(cited in Deacy 2002). It is as if when religion is 'squeezed' out of one area of social life, it simply finds expression in another. "By broadening and globalizing our view of religion…we begin to see the power of religion even in a world that has become increasingly cynical and sceptical toward its own values and capacity to change. Religion, as always, seems to reshape itself to fit the moment."[1]

If religion really does change shape or appearance as society itself mutates, this makes it almost inevitable that religion will begin to appear in unexpected places and via new media. "If before, it was the religious realm which appeared to be the all-encompassing reality within which the secular realm found its proper place, now the secular sphere will be the all-encompassing reality, to which the religious sphere will have to

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[1] **http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2001-01-29-religionintro.shtml**

adapt" (Casanova 1994 p15). This is a slightly more nuanced version of the secularisation thesis, pointing to religious *change*, rather than simply *decline*. Studying "what new systems of classification and differentiation [and I would add 'manifestation'] emerge within this one secular world and what new place religion will have" (ibid) is part of our task as scholars of religion. This means looking in those places and at those media perhaps most profoundly associated with the 'secular' world and harnessing their potential for teaching and learning for our own purposes.

Popular music

Trystan Hughes (Trinity College, Carmarthen) argues that there are many elements within pop music that can be exploited for teaching religious studies. There are 'religious' songs, songs with secularised religious themes, and religious critique within pop songs. It is also easy to identify 'spirituality' in pop songs and the use of theological concepts. The song 'Shining Light (Ash)[2] is used in a first year course as a way of showing students that religion and spirituality are not topics confined to their religious studies lectures or to the four walls of a place of worship. Most students know the song, yet many presume it to be purely a love song. Once it has been critically evaluated, the many possible interpretations of the song become clear; from its being 'just' a love song, to being a song about Christ, and to becoming even a Marian hymn. Additionally, Hughes tries to show students how popular songs and the music industry associated with them might also be a form of 'alternative'

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[2] *Shining Light*

© Ash (from *Free All Angels* 2001)
Roman candles that burn in the night/ Yeah you are a shining light/ You lit a torch in the infinite/ Yeah you are a shining light/ Yeah you light up my life.

You have always been a thorn in their side/ But to me you're a shining light/ You arrive and the night is alive/ Yeah you are a shining light/ Yeah you light up my life.

We made a connection/ A full on chemical reaction/ But by dark divine intervention/ Yeah you are a shining light/ A constellation once seen/ Over Royal David's city/ An epiphany, you burn so pretty/ Yeah you are a shining light.

You are a force you are a constant source/ Yeah you are a shining light/ Incandescent in the darkest night/ Yeah you are a shining light/ My mortal blood I would sacrifice/ For you are my shining light/ Sovereign bride of the infinite/ Yeah you are a shining light.

 These are the days you often say/ There's nothing that we cannot do/ Beneath a canopy of stars/I'd shed blood for you/ The north star in the firmament/ You shine the most bright/ I've seen you draped in an electric veil/ Shrouded in celestial light.

religion, with Elvis Presley being a classic example. Many students have never before reflected on their own consumption of and relationship to popular music and its 'idols', yet it is for many of them a familiar world that they inhabit much more than that of contemporary Christianity. Through courses on 'Culture and Christianity' (level 1) and 'Rock of Ages' (level 3), they learn to see religious expression and vocabulary in unexpected places, especially in their own lives outside the classroom.

Film

Likewise Chris Deacy (also Trinity College) uses modern film as a medium for teaching through awakening students to the possibility that "film can be seen to wrestle with, and bear witness to, some of the most fundamental themes and insights which lie at the heart of religious [and] specifically Christian activity"(Deacy 2000). The protagonist in one of the films nominated for an Oscar award in 2000, *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont 1999) could be construed as a Christ-like figure who can heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and who ultimately suffers a wrongful and ignominious death for the sins of another. Deacy argues that film, far from being a route to escapism from life's big questions, in fact offers the possibility for engendering self-questioning on spiritual and religious matters, both for the audience and for students who critically engage with themes that emerge in film. Deacy concurs with Marsh and Ortiz in their well-known volume *Explorations in Theology and Film* that there has been a neglect of film within religious studies. This may be the result of cultural snobbishness or suspicion, a desire for doctrinal purity, a concern that theology should be prevented from becoming too 'worldly', or simply belief that the conversation is not very fruitful. But "if Christian theology is not now to become a discussion between fewer and fewer people … then the central question is not *whether* Christian theology converses with film, but *how*" (Ortiz and Marsh 1997 p 4).

The Internet

Author of the *Good Web Guide to World Religions* (Bunt 2001), Gary Bunt (Lampeter) uses the Internet as a teaching tool with students at Lampeter, and engages their critical faculties of web resources and virtual religion by asking questions about authenticity, authority and authorship. Furthermore, an increasing number of institutions are offering distance learning courses, and this is as true of Theology and Religious Studies (e.g. at Lampeter) as other subject areas. The world wide web is an important means for 'breaking down the classroom walls' by enabling students to study in their own time, and offering them access to a wide variety of resources. Giving them the critical skills to engage with this

new medium and use it as part of their own research has added another dimension to the standard pedagogical task of teachers.

More of our institutions are now installing data jacks and docking stations for laptops into teaching rooms. This enables us to meet this challenge of educating students about the authority and authenticity of material on a web site, and how to handle and evaluate contradiction and disputed material. They also learn how to question the 'agenda' of web authors, and to identify how the Internet is used for proselytism and recruitment to both real and 'virtual' religions (Dawson and Hennebry 1999). The way in which boundaries and traditional authority structures of religions are being contested through the Internet is clearly illustrated by many of Gary's recent writings (see also Bunt 2000).

Drama

My colleague in Cardiff, Dr Will Johnson, has brought ancient Indian religious texts to life through dramatic performance, thereby giving students the chance to learn, through action and experience, what it might be like to be the character they portray. As preparation for an eventual undergraduate course in 'Indian Epic, Myth, and Drama', he has been exploring ways in which drama and dramatization might be used as a means of approaching textual and other material. The project has its roots in a new translation he is preparing of the famous Sanskrit play, *The Recognition of Sakuntala* by Kalidasa. Initially, he was interested to see how this might work in performance outside the Indian context, and to that end gathered together a small group of postgraduates to rehearse and perform the first act of the play. He was encouraged by seeing that certain key concepts in Indian religious culture (such as the notoriously difficult to define *dharma*) could be transmitted and illluminated in a dramatic context. Wanting to explore this further, he subsequently worked with a small group of undergraduate volunteers on dramatising a section of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, addressing such questions as how to convey ideas in dialogue, and the relation of the epic narrative form to philosophical or didactic passages. This small workshop suggested that there is plentiful scope for identifying and concentrating religious attitudes and ideas in dramatic dialogue, and that involvement in that process is potentially a valuable and engaging tool in promoting student learning.

This kind of approach may appear to be particularly appropriate to certain classical Indian texts, sections of which are already in dialogue form (e.g. some *Upanisads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*). However the process

of dramatizing philosophical, didactic, and ritual texts in general has further potential benefits for student learning. Not the least of these is that such a process requires the student to identify the central issues in any textual passage and articulate the questions they raise in a wider context. Such an approach also provides an excellent opportunity for students to collaborate creatively, and may well build a good platform for introducing an element of group assessment into the eventual course. The overall pedagogical aim of such a course would be to provide a mechanism for students to play an active, 'hands on' role in bringing a wide variety of textual material to life in a relevant but creative way.

Art

In a new course at Cardiff University entitled 'The Social Context of Religion', instead of introducing students to the ideas of Durkheim through established sociology of religion textbooks (or even *The Elementary Forms of Religious* Life itself!), instead I shall be using the commentary on Durkheim's ideas that were linked to the major 2001-2 UK touring exhibition 'Sacred and Profane'[3]. The exhibition sought to explore society's apparently contradictory tendencies towards sacrilegious transgression and spiritual transcendence, via photography, sculpture and installation. The artists juxtaposed powerful themes of physical and spiritual, good and evil, death and sex, repulsion and desire and through these they tried to explore the idea that perceptions of the profane might be integral to understanding of the sacred.

Like Deacy, who suggests that perhaps movie theatre might be performing a religious function, the curator of the 'Sacred and Profane' exhibition poses the question as to whether "art has become the new religion, the gallery a church, and the artist the sacred messenger who explore for us the fundamental questions of life?"(Milne 2001 p 13). In reply, one of the exhibitors, Marc Quinn, presents an illuminating answer: "I think art might ask such fundamental questions…the artist has the time and energy to concentrate on things which others only contemplate in passing because they have to deal constantly with the banalities of life"(Quinn 1999). Even more reason then perhaps to explore the works of film-makers and artists in teaching theology and religious studies today. Through the artistic imagination of creative photographers, sculptors and artists working through diverse media, students might come to see the possibilities for recognising the extraordinary within the ordinary, the divine within the prosaic. The home page of the 'Sacred and Profane' web site offers the tantalising

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[3] **http://www.sacredandprofane.org.uk/home.html**

thought that "when artists put the grubby, the everyday, next to the wonderous, the hallowed, the sacred, strange things happen". To what extent dare we employ unpredictable media in our teaching, for fear of 'strange things happening'? The artists in Sacred and Profane are not creating illusions to convince us to believe in God, as were the early painters of the Christian faith. Instead they are forcing us to think hard about difficult subjects, and they do this by using materials that we know so well that we can't help having an immediate gut reaction. Initiating a 'gut reaction' in this way can be a powerful teaching tool in helping students to become critical and reflexive, especially where they are challenged to develop "a deeper understanding of their own tradition or perspective" and to "challenge their own tradition and become self-critical" (Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Group, *Theology and Religious Studies: Mapping the Subject*).

In his paper at the Gregynog conference, Chris Deacy cited Walter Capps, author of *Religious Studies: The Making of A Discipline* who noted that scholars are often "taken by surprise by hosts of topics that are not within the range and focus of that at which they have been trained to look"(Capps 1995 p 342). Capps argues that religious studies has tended to proceed along well-established, repeatable lines of inquiry, and the classification of identifiable patterns, essences, natures and structures. By concentrating attention on the methodologically accessible and the duplicable, other more esoteric realities may be missed. "Why is the mentality of the technician sanctioned in religious studies while the attitude of the artist is treated with suspicion?" (ibid). He suggests that many important subjects are "overlooked, underestimated, or deliberately shunned because they do not qualify for high-priority assessment given their place within the world from which intelligibility is being approached and by which it is also measured" (ibid).

The use of non-traditional, and especially audio-visual teaching resources is one way out of this impasse. As Deacy argued in light of Capps' comments, although a course such as 'Holy Hollywood: Religion and Film' should not necessarily be on the syllabus of every degree programme in Theology and Religious Studies, its inclusion would not be wide of the mark. Such a course would give students new avenues for thinking about issues such as death, hope, and human meaning. "Theologians and Religious Studies scholars are being faced with a new challenge—one which involves coming to terms with the fact that people's hopes, aspirations, fears and anxieties, as traditionally expressed through traditional religious institutions and agencies, are being

articulated through new vehicles of expression and outside of traditionally demarcated boundaries of religious activity". If Deacy is right, it becomes beholden upon contemporary teachers of the discipline to engage with this reality and find new ways and technologies of bringing it alive to students.

Within the University of Wales, there is therefore a burgeoning expertise and interest in creative teaching that is breaking down the classroom walls by allowing 'secular' media and methods to inspire student-centred learning. This article has been written in order to share some of this good practice, but prior to any conclusion, it is perhaps necessary also to reflect on the pitfalls and limitations of 'non-traditional' resources for teaching in Religious Studies, alongside the opportunities and possibilities. In addition to the potential for technological hitches and mishaps, where do the dangers of simply 'entertaining' students via contemporary media outweigh skilful approaches that inform and connect with the experience of those we are trying to teach? What criteria might inform a decision to favour a non-traditional or multi-media resource as opposed to a more conventional teaching method? Clearly the answers to these questions will be shaped to some extent by the area in which one specialises and the range of resources available, but some of the following points are perhaps worth considering.

- Over-enthusiasm for teaching via popular culture needs to be tempered and we need to be cautious of over-reliance on wholly passive or wholly active teaching strategies. Students will vary in their receptivity to different methods. The findings of research conducted by Mike Fearn at Bangor on personality and perceptions of teaching methods confirm the necessity for lecturers to use a broad range of techniques and devices.

- As our classrooms become more multi-faith and international, we perhaps need to consider the sensitivities of students to more explicit sexual or violent themes in film, art, or music, and the potential for causing unnecessary offence.

- There is a danger of over-entertaining students with constant activity and discussion, to the point that they lose traditional skills of taking notes and following a spoken argument and critique.

- However, the use of non-traditional resources, such as listening to a popular song or watching clips from a movie, is a means of giving students an 'experience' of religion without them actually *doing* anything that some might find uncomfortable in a classroom context, such as experimenting with yoga or chanting (though

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some degree courses in religious studies in the USA do follow this 'hands-on' path!). Experiential learning is likely to prove a much more powerful, memorable and 'active' way of understanding and acquiring new information.

- The religious 'literacy' of students is enlarged through the use of diverse, non-traditional teaching resources as they become proficient in identifying the ways in which religion is articulated across historical periods and in different cultural settings.

- The use of the various media of popular culture in teaching further pushes at the (necessarily) fluid boundaries of Theology and Religious Studies as a subject area, and thereby engages students in the process of debate about, and construction of, the nature of the discipline and dialogue between different traditions and approaches.

- The use of non-traditional resources for teaching can be used to enlarge student understanding of the myriad forms, qualities and manifestations of religion. For example, through an analysis of the lyrics in some popular music songs, religious imagery, critique and language, previously 'taken for granted' become identifiable and they see religion "out there" in contemporary life. That there might be differing interpretations of what song lyrics or film themes mean deliberately takes students beyond 'A' level mode by showing them how differences of interpretation have characterised religions throughout history.

- Some students (especially perhaps mature students) are likely to bring considerable prior knowledge of some kind of popular culture to their learning in Theology and Religious Studies. The use of familiar film or music in class allies previous knowledge and interests with new learning, and would be likely to build the confidence of students who may struggle with 'traditional' teaching methods and approaches. Furthermore, through their knowledge of popular culture (probably more extensive among younger students than their teachers), the power balance of the classroom becomes more evenly balanced as teachers learn from students.

- Teaching via the media of popular culture lends itself to alternative means of assessment, e.g. placing a review or critique of a film on a web site.

Using diverse media, especially those derived from popular culture, seems an entirely appropriate way of responding to the many avenues of religious expression and performance in contemporary society.

Furthermore, as higher education becomes less elite, the use of popular culture is a way of meeting the interests of a new generation of students. If eclecticism is the dominant hallmark of religious believing and belonging, then so too our teaching methods need to draw from a variety of sources.

In later editions of his classic *The Religious Experience of Mankind* the late Ninian Smart added a seventh component to his 'dimensions' of religion. In addition to the social, the mythological, the experiential, the ritual, the doctrinal, and the ethical aspects of religion, he went on to add 'the material'. Were he still alive today, I wonder whether he might have gone on to add an eighth dimension, perhaps along the lines of 'the virtual' or 'the digital'?

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