The Lancaster Religious Studies degree scheme is one of the most distinguished in Britain, taught by staff with a national and international reputation for both teaching and research. It was also the first degree of its kind in the UK. Its distinctive, global and multidisciplinary approach to the study of religion has become a model for the development of the study of religions in Britain and overseas.

The Religious Studies degree at Lancaster offers a comparative and intercultural approach to the study of religions. The degree is particularly strong in the following areas:

• in-depth coverage of the world’s major traditions, including: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism
• training in the key methods for studying religion: sociological, anthropological, historical, philosophical, textual, theological and psychological
• emphasis on religious traditions in modern and contemporary contexts
• cutting-edge research on religion in Britain
• a flourishing and expanding programme in Asian religions

With one of the lowest staff to student ratios in the UK, we pride ourselves on our professional, friendly, and collegial atmosphere.
Degrees in Religious Studies are offered within the Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion (PPR). This allows students and staff to take full advantage of the many ways in which these fields of study reinforce each other. Each of the three disciplines has built up an excellent reputation for teaching and research. The department not only allows researchers and students to engage in subject-specific teaching, learning and research, but also to engage with problems of great contemporary importance that benefit from an interdisciplinary approach. For example: problems of religion and conflict, diplomacy, terrorism, health policy, multiculturalism, and human rights.

By choosing to study in PPR you will be joining a vibrant, international community based in the thriving Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Lancaster University (ranked in the top 10 in the UK in The Guardian 2013 University guide). PPR is ranked number one in the North West in all three of its subject areas.

Undergraduate study

The Religious Studies degree at Lancaster offers a comparative approach to the study of religion, focusing upon the various ways the human race has expressed its search for meaning. We offer courses on the major traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism; and we train students to do research using the methods appropriate to their study: historical, textual, philosophical, theological, sociological, anthropological and psychological. Some of the topics covered in our wide range of courses include: religion and politics; religion and gender; religion and violence; philosophy and religious thought; religion in relation to secularism, pluralism, and multiculturalism; interpretations of sacred texts; and new age spiritualities.

One great advantage of studying at Lancaster is the flexible degree structure. This allows you to find out more about subjects that you want to study, to change what you study, or to take modules outside your main area of study. All Religious Studies students take three subjects in their first year (what we call Part I). For example, a single honours Religious Studies students will have to take RST100 (the Religious Studies Part I course) but then can choose what else to study from over 40 other options (e.g. he/she might take Politics and Sociology, or History and Film Studies, in his/her first year—note that there are entry requirements for some Part I courses, and quotas for others. The current University Undergraduate Prospectus has details). Another example: a joint honours student in Philosophy and Religious Studies will take Part I courses in Philosophy and Religious Studies, and choose one other option (many will choose Ethics, Philosophy and Religion, which has its own separate Part I course, others might choose, for example, History, Politics, or Criminology).

At the end of the first year students decide which subjects they want to continue with in the second and third year (Part II). The Philosophy and Religious Studies student may decide to drop Philosophy and carry on doing single honours in Religious Studies. The Religious Studies student may decide that he/she really likes Politics, and so switches to a joint honours degree. In other words, rather than being stuck with the decision you made before you went to University, Lancaster allows you try out undergraduate study in different subjects and then see what suits you best by. The Lancaster system is akin to that found in the traditional Universities in the US, like Harvard, Yale and Princeton where students decide on their “major” after an initial sampling of different courses. As a result Lancaster has one of the lowest undergraduate dropout rates in the UK.
Teaching and Learning

What do you actually do when you study for a degree in the Department? Studying at University is different from school or college. In addition to structured teaching through lectures and seminars you are given the freedom to develop your own knowledge and skills. Teaching and learning in Religious Studies involves a number of different kinds of activity. First there are lectures. These are where academic staff provide you with information, guidance, and—we hope—a bit of inspiration. We teach topics that we have an interest in and know a lot about: so we hope that we can get some of our enthusiasm for our subject across to you! Lectures can be quite large—much bigger than classes at school—with up to 300 in some first year lectures. Second, there are seminars. These are smaller group meetings with up to 15 students and a tutor. Seminars typically involve set readings, exercises, or other tasks, which form the basis for debate and discussion. In the third year most students will do a dissertation (5,000 or 10,000 words) where they work one-on-one with a tutor on a specific topic of their choosing within the area of their degree.

How does all this fit together? In the first year, as we saw above, you take three Part I courses. These normally have two one-hour lectures a week, plus a one-hour seminar, per course (some courses may have slightly more or less). Everyone does three courses in Part I giving a total of nine hours of contact time per week. In the second and third year, during Michaelmas and Lent term, you will typically be doing four Part II modules at the same time. Each module standardly has a 1.5 hour lecture and a one-hour seminar making ten hours a week in total. That might not seem like much, but remember, you are expected to work approximately 35 hours a week on your studies. Throughout the year in both Part I and Part II you are expected to produce essays, or other assignments, which are assessed. Course work in Part II counts towards your final degree result. Most taught modules also have summer exams (second and third year results count towards your final degree). For most modules, the exam will count for more than the coursework (typically 60% exam, 40% coursework). Overall, throughout all three years, we expect a considerable degree of personal responsibility for learning on the part of students: but then that’s what makes doing a degree interesting and rewarding—it wouldn’t really be worth studying for three years if we could simply tell you all the answers in an afternoon!

Developing skills

The various forms of learning and assessment involved in the degrees offered in PPR help students develop a wide range of knowledge and skills—both subject specific skills and wider transferable skills that contribute towards your future employment. More specifically, students refine and develop: their critical and analytical abilities through their reading and essay writing; presentational and team working skills through seminar and group work; IT skills through the use of online teaching and learning resources; and written presentation skills through the production of well-structured, well-edited, academic texts.

The Lancaster degree structure also encourages personal development and an increase in individual responsibility for study as students progress through their degree. In Part II students choose which modules they want to study from a range of options. In the third year most students will be required to do a sustained piece of writing—a dissertation or project—one a specific topic agreed upon with an individual supervisor. By the time students finish their Undergraduate studies in Religious Studies they will have developed the initiative and skills necessary to engage in self-directed study and research (and a good number of our students stay on to do graduate courses where they pursue their interests and develop their skills even further). Students can also gain a number of valuable experiences while pursuing a Religious Studies degree at Lancaster, through volunteering, studying abroad and placements.
The Religious Studies programme is keen to ensure that students do as well, academically, as they possibly can. Academic staff have weekly office hours (in addition to lecture and seminar times) where you can discuss your work, or raise queries, or seek advice. Each student also has an academic tutor for the whole three years, who can keep an eye on how things are going across all the your modules, and upon how things are developing over time. The University offers also various forms of academic support, study skills training and advice over and above that offered by the department.

Financial support

Lancaster University offers various kinds of financial support including academic scholarships for those with exceptional qualifications, and bursaries for students whose family income falls below certain thresholds. For details of the current University financial support packages please view the scholarships and bursaries section of the University website: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/fees-and-funding/scholarships-and-bursaries/

Thanks to a recent generous donation by an alumnus from PPR, the department can now offer a limited number of £3000 (£1000 per year) undergraduate academic scholarships. Because Lancaster University already offers academic scholarships, the PPR scholarships will be awarded to those students whose grades do not render them eligible for the Lancaster University academic scholarship, but who, in the view of the PPR scholarship panel, show exceptional academic promise. These PPR scholarships can be held together with the (means-tested) Lancaster University bursary. For further details see the PPR homepage.
Special needs and student support services

Lancaster University has a well-established and highly experienced student support service providing services including: disability support; dyslexia tuition and study support; solving accessibility issues; student counselling; disabled student allowances and other funding; adapted exams. For further details follow the relevant links at: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/

Employability

A degree in Religious Studies or Ethics, Philosophy and Religion, unlike degrees in for example, Forestry or Dentistry, is not vocational and there is no one single career destination for our students. However, the skills you acquire by studying for a degree in Religious Studies or Ethics, Philosophy and Religion are relevant to a wide range of graduate career paths: over 40% of graduate jobs are open to graduates of any discipline. Research skills, communication skills, skills in critical argument and in assessing, summarising and editing complex information are all key skills in a modern workplace. For those intending to pursue a teaching career the Religious Studies degree programme offers a third year placement module with teaching experience in local schools. Religious Studies students are strongly encouraged, by their second year, to start making use of the Lancaster University Centre for Enterprise, Employability and Careers (CEEC). CEEC offers a wide range of support, advice and training on everything from CVs and interview techniques, to setting up a business. Lancaster University also offers an additional non-academic qualification “The Lancaster Award”: a certificate of achievement for students who complete a range of activities including work experience, community volunteering, participating in and completing employability and careers events and tasks. Students also gain valuable experience through the Student Union’s placement and enterprise service “Involve”.

Religious Studies society

The Religious Studies degree programme has its own student-run Religious Studies society, which organises socials, film screenings, speakers, excursions, and study sessions, along with other activities.
I was able to pursue my interest in Indian Religions through studying in India between my second and third year. Studying and traveling amongst, what became the ordinariness of temple puja, street shrines, the call to prayer, yellow robed sadhus, people on pilgrimages, etc. made me realise that Indian religions were far more complex and fascinating than I first thought.

Iona – BA Religious Studies (2009-12)
Study Abroad

At Lancaster you can take a full year abroad in the second year, usually to a North American (USA, Canada) university. Spending a year abroad does not mean that you add an extra year to your degree programme - a year abroad at one of our partner institutions is considered equivalent to a year at Lancaster. Additionally, Lancaster offers the only course in Religious Studies in the UK which incorporates studying in India. Set up by Ninian Smart in 1981, this unique course, Religion in Contemporary Indian Life, is taught at the Visthar centre in Bangalore, India. The course is three weeks and is taught during the summer vacation at the end of the second year. Upon returning to Lancaster, students then write a 10,000 dissertation based on their research and experiences.

Applications and open days

Admission to Undergraduate degree schemes is via UCAS (www.ucas.ac.uk). The Department organises a number of UCAS open days during the year, normally on selected Saturday afternoons, and Wednesday during most schools half-term break. These are intended for applicants to undergraduate degree schemes who have received a UCAS offer. Dates for the current year are detailed in the offer letter (alternatively, you can check the PPR website (www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ppr). The Departmental and University website also has details about bursaries, scholarships and student finances.

Campus accommodation - guaranteed

One final point worth noting if you are thinking of applying to Lancaster is that Lancaster University can guarantee campus accommodation for all incoming undergraduates who make Lancaster their firm UCAS choice. Most students live off campus in their second year — there is plenty of affordable, safe and attractive housing in Lancaster (rents in the city are relatively low because the University has built lots of new student accommodation over the past five years or so). Many students choose to return to campus accommodation in their third year. Further details are available on the University website: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/accommodation/

We can now turn to the BA Honours degree schemes offered in PPR in the three subject areas.
Religion is a major factor in world history and modern politics and its study involves knowledge of the major traditions, of the issues they raise and of the different methods of analysing them. The Religious Studies degree at Lancaster offers a comparative approach to the study of religion, focusing upon the various ways the human race has expressed its search for meaning. Our degrees will appeal both to those who have studied religion before and to those who do not have Religious Studies as a school subject. The questions religions pose are as old as History and as new as the New Age. We offer courses on the major traditions and methods appropriate to their study: historical, textual, philosophical, theological, sociological, anthropological and psychological. In an increasingly global world and an increasingly multicultural society, those with knowledge of other faiths, beliefs, philosophies and cultures are highly valued by many prospective employers. Religious Studies is recognised as a high quality degree which equips graduates with a wide range of skills in analysis and human interaction. This is much appreciated by prospective employers in both the private and public sectors.

Religious Studies degree scheme

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Single honours

- V627 Religious Studies

Joint honours

- VV65 Philosophy and Religious Studies
- VV56 Ethics, Philosophy, Religion
- LV26 Politics and Religious Studies
- QV36 English Literature and Religious Studies
- VV16 History and Religious Studies
- VL63 Religious Studies and Sociology
What does it mean to be human? What do we owe to other people? How can we understand our relationship with the divine? Indeed, what does it mean to talk about the divine or the infinite? Can we have decent and meaningful human relationships without the presence of something greater?

The joint honours in Ethics, Philosophy and Religion is an innovative degree unique to Lancaster University. This joint honours degree combines courses from Religious Studies and Philosophy. The courses available through the degree offer philosophical, theological, religious, western, Asian, cross-cultural, ancient, and modern approaches to some of life’s biggest questions.

Courses include

- Ethics: Theory and Practice
- Religion and Society
- Constructing Ethics: Christianity and Islam
- Politics and Ethics in Indian Philosophy
- Reading Buddhism
- Modern Christian Thought

Specific details about other Religious Studies degree schemes—including information about their aims, structure, module options, entry requirements and scholarships—can be found in the relevant Degree Factsheets, or on the PPR website.
If you are still at school or college it may be hard to picture what it is like studying for any of the degrees noted above. Here some of our undergraduate students give their views of studying here.

Before I attended my first open day at Lancaster University I was adamant that I would take a degree in Christian Theology, not Religious Studies. Deciding to come here and abandon all hopes of a theology degree is quite easily the best decision I’ve ever made. The diverse and varied cultural and religious aspects of the traditions that I have studied have left me stunned that I could have missed out on all of this. The course has affected my way of thought to the extent that I am now going to live in and travel around India over the summer, as part of my degree here, an opportunity that is too good to miss. Choosing Religious Studies at Lancaster University is not a decision you will regret!

Adam – BA Religious Studies (2010-13)

As a final year mature student, and Religious studies major here at Lancaster, I can say that Religious studies at Lancaster is part of an excellent department with friendly staff and recognised academics. It has a reputation of rigorous academic quality and is a stimulating place where contemporary research takes place around you. The newly developed department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion offers excellent possibilities for multi-disciplinary study and the expansion of your horizons. The undergraduate courses make Lancaster a challenging and interesting place to study all aspects of World religion from multiple perspectives. Lancaster is also a great place to live, work and study and certainly a place for those who may also have continuing postgraduate ambitions

Oliver – BA Religious Studies (2010-13)
Postgraduate Study

This section gives some basic information about postgraduate study in Religious Studies at Lancaster University. Fuller information and details about current postgraduate funding opportunities, bursaries, staff research interests, and so on, can be found on the departmental website: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ppr/

Students who take a Masters degree in Religious Studies come from a wide variety of backgrounds with many diverse interests. Some may have recently graduated from BA programmes, in religion or theology, or from other subjects within the humanities and social sciences, and are keen to study aspects of religion in some depth. Some may have taken a break from their chosen profession to pursue their interest in religion as a global phenomenon, or have an interest in one or more religious traditions. Others, use the MA as ideal preparation for a postgraduate research degree (i.e., for the MPhil, or PhD degrees). All our student benefit from the advantage a higher degree offers in terms of career prospects.

Reflecting its status as one of the top 10 universities in the UK (according to the 2012 Times, Independent and Guardian University Guides) Lancaster University is firmly committed to postgraduate study, demonstrated by its lively and cosmopolitan Graduate School of nearly 3,000 students. People come to study, and teach, at Lancaster from all over the world – about 90 different nationalities are represented on campus. Reflecting its international reputation, the University has links with many other universities around the world, and there are regular staff and student exchanges with many other countries. Lancaster offers a safe, attractive and well designed campus, with a purpose-built graduate college situated in close proximity to some of Britain’s most beautiful countryside. The Department offers two main postgraduate degree pathways: (i) MA (and also MRes/LLM); (ii) MPhil/PhD:

MA programmes

The MA programme in Religious Studies is based upon a combination of advanced level taught courses, self-directed supervised study, and a substantial dissertation. They are usually taken full-time over one year, but may also be taken on a part-time basis over two years. The MA is a widely recognised qualification in its own right, providing advanced training beyond first degree level, and also prepares students for the more intensive research of the PhD programme.

Teaching and learning

MA programmes usually start in October and (for full-time students) run to the end of September in the following year. Students take a number of taught modules in Michaelmas and Lent term (the norm is five modules). In the summer vacation full-time students write a substantial dissertation of 15-20,000 words for submission in September.

*There is some variation amongst the different MA programmes on offer in Religious Studies. Most programmes involve one or more core taught modules. Taught modules last for one term, may involve weekly seminars, and are normally assessed by a 5,000 word essay. In addition to core taught modules MA students select additional taught modules in their subject area. For a full list of current modules see the Department website http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ppr/

Other modules may involve self-directed supervised study on a topic agreed upon and developed with an academic supervisor, once again, assessed by a 5,000 word essay.
Entry and applying

Entry to the MA degree scheme normally requires at least an upper second class honours degree (or the equivalent) in a subject related to the field of study for the MA. If you are unsure about your eligibility for the MA programme contact the PPR postgraduate secretary Clare Coxhill (c.coxhill@lancaster.ac.uk). There is no strict deadline and you may apply at any time. However, it is advised to apply as early as you can in the academic year, especially if you are applying from outside of the UK.

Please note that studentships, scholarships and other awards usually have deadlines. In order to be considered for financial aid you are normally required to apply to the University.

MA programmes in Religious Studies

• MA Religious Studies
• MA Philosophy and Religion
• MA Diplomacy and Religion
• MA Politics, Philosophy and Religion
• MA Religion and Conflict

The MA programmes in Religious Studies explore the full range of theoretical approaches to the study of religion and monitor your progress from induction to completion of your dissertation. Dissertation topics are developed in consultation with your academic supervisor and the Director of Studies. Postgraduate students benefit from our dynamic research culture and we have long-standing links with scholars, professional bodies and organisations both inside and outside Lancaster. Further information and details about MA programmes For more information and current details of the MA programmes that interest you, please go to the PPR website: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ppr/

MPhil and PhD research degrees

The MPhil and PhD research degrees are both based predominantly on a sustained piece of research (a dissertation) and are ideally suited for those contemplating a career in research or teaching at an advanced level. Admission to the MPhil/PhD programme is dependent on your showing evidence of your capacity to work at the appropriate level.

All research students at Lancaster are initially registered as taking an MPhil and then after a period of successful progress are transferred to a PhD registration. However, an MPhil is a postgraduate qualification in its own right and students can decide to register for this with the intention of completing a smaller study (a thesis of 40-60,000 words) over two years. At the end of your second, (final) year of the MPhil (if you are a full-time student), if your work has reached the appropriate level, you may transfer from a MPhil to a PhD registration. A PhD is now a basic requirement for any career in teaching and research in universities. The PhD takes a minimum of three years’ full-time study (including the work done on the MPhil) or up to five years part-time. It is awarded on the basis of a substantial thesis (60 - 80,000 words), which must be seen as making an original contribution to its field. Our research culture and code of practice for supervisors ensures that research students are well supported and can become actively involved in the research life of the department and the wider academic field relevant to their chosen study. The student and supervisors are at liberty to work out the most appropriate training package or style of support that the student needs and a structured programme of meetings and research targets including the presentation of papers to the department’s friendly ‘work in progress’ sessions. PhDs are available part time and changes of registration from part-time to full time (or the reverse) can be accommodated.

Research students are encouraged to attend the department in order to take part in, and indeed to help constitute, the lively research atmosphere. Reflecting its wide range of expertise, the Department has a lively research culture including regular departmental and PhD seminars together with an annual Graduate Presentation Days where research students present work in progress to fellow students and staff. In addition, research students are encouraged to participate in the regular Faculty-wide workshops, presentations and training sessions. The University also has a wide range of programmes that research students are welcome to attend, and we encourage all researchers to make links to other departments in the Faculty as well as to departments and research centres in other faculties. However, we do have the facilities to make arrangements to support students who live at a distance and wish to take their PhD in “distance” mode.
Applying for MPhil/PhD study

Subsequent to initial enquiries, formal applications need to be accompanied by a concise research proposal of about 3,000 words. The proposal should include a clear statement on the question or issues to be researched, the existing literature and/or debates on the question, what is special or original about this work, what methods will be used, and an outline of fieldwork if relevant. A short indicative bibliography should also be included.

What our post-graduate students say

I have been a PhD student here for the last three years, and am about to submit now! Studying in the department has been a wonderful experience: I returned to study slightly unconfident after several years’ break since my Masters, having taken time out to raise a family. But the department was extremely welcoming, understanding and accommodating of my life as a student and a mother. Not only have my supervision tutorials been a driving force behind my PhD, but the department’s overall rigorous research culture has shaped me immensely. Its regular departmental and postgraduate activities have been a super way of knowing the wider field. This year I was given the opportunity to teach on several undergraduate courses: that has been a great experience for my academic future. A strong challenging research culture, coupled with great departmental and peer support is a rare combination, but one that I have been privileged to experience here!
Raana 2009-12

Throughout my studies at Lancaster I have benefitted from the wide and varied range of research interests of the academic staff and have received enormous encouragement from both them and the administrative staff, taking an interest in my academic and personal development in order to make my time here as beneficial as possible. As a PhD student I have had the rewarding opportunity to pass on some of my enthusiasm for both my subject and studying at Lancaster, tutoring 1st year undergraduates and encouraging them to take advantage of the wide range of extra-curricular activities the university, and the wider community, has to offer in order to make their time here as rewarding as mine has been so far.
Brendan 2010-13
Growing up in California, from a young age I had an awareness of and curiosity in Asian cultures. I followed up these interests by studying for a year at the University of Delhi in India, when I was an undergraduate. Subsequently, I worked as an English teacher in Japan for two years after I graduated from university. These experiences have continued to shape my personal and academic interests ever since.

I believe that one of the most rewarding aspects of a university education is the opportunity to question one’s own cultural assumptions and to learn about cultures and traditions from around the world. In modern British universities, a Religious Studies degree offers something vital and unique: an empathetic engagement with cultural difference. To learn about different religions and philosophies challenges students to become more self-reflective and become more responsible citizens in an increasingly multi-cultural and interconnected world. Indeed, Religious Studies is the degree in British universities that most directly and consistently deals with diversity and difference; it is the field of study that is most likely to engage students with a variety of worldviews.

I have always enjoyed teaching, particularly about subjects such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which are exciting and challenging for British students. I am particularly happy to be convenor for the module Religion in Contemporary Indian Life, which allows students to study in India for three weeks between their second and third years. Experiencing a different culture at a young age has changed the way I think about the world; I am honored to be teaching students at Lancaster who are taking up similar opportunities.

As practically every one of our prospective students tell us when they come for an Open Day at Lancaster, thoughtful young people are keenly aware of how Britain is a highly pluralistic society - not only in terms of ethnicity and language, but also in social and ethical beliefs and lifestyles. The study of religion, not only in terms of doctrines and practices, or history and change, but also in terms of the cultural vocabulary which exists even outside explicitly religious contexts, is vital to a greater understanding of this rapidly changing society. Religion has traditionally been taught and studied at Lancaster as a lens through which to understand the complexity of the contemporary world. Practical as well as conceptual consequences flow out of such study. British citizens need to have critical sympathy for those around them, they need to be self-aware of their own changing attitudes, and they need to articulate responses to the urgent challenges facing the world. I believe that the Lancaster approach to the study of religion - which is interdisciplinary, systematic, wide-ranging, undogmatic, and comparative - offers a model for the study of religion in Britain that is highly relevant.

My particular interest is to approach a range of conceptual questions, whether theological, philosophical, historical or social scientific, through a study of Indian traditions. Pressing contemporary concerns about social order, the relationship between the public and the private, and the nature and limits of dissent in pluralistic societies, are approached through the history of Western liberalism; and yet they can usefully be illuminated through looking at the ideas and developments of Indian history. It is a recognition of the need for this kind of comparative study that prompted and has sustained my research.
secularization of modern society, the religious landscape is buzzing with issues, developments and debates which touch on the heart of what it means to be human in our increasingly industrialised, technologically advanced and globally connected world. From new and alternative religions, through indigenous traditions to religious fundamentalisms, the contemporary religious terrain is awash with things to study, engage and puzzle over.

My approach to teaching religion uses what is often termed an ‘agnostic methodology’. First and foremost, this approach makes no assumptions about those who study religion. Agnostic, atheist or believer can equally engage in the academic study of religion. Second, this approach does not aim to establish truth or falsity but concerns itself with analysis and reflection upon the beliefs, practices and contexts which combine to form a religious worldview. Through this approach, I encourage religious believers to reach a point of critical distance from which they can study religion in a manner which meets prevailing academic standards and disciplinary expectations. At the same time, I encourage those of an agnostic or atheistic persuasion to reach a point of empathetic understanding from which they are able to engage religion with an awareness of and appreciation for its beliefs, practices, contexts and human followers. In short, whatever your background, commitments and concerns, if you’re open to developing the critical empathy needed to get the most out of studying religion, then you’re ready to delve into this vibrant and interesting subject.

Gavin Hyman: philosophy and religious thought; continental philosophy and critical theory and implications for theology, ethics and politics; cultural and philosophical history of atheism; religion and psychoanalytic thought

I have always been interested in the questions that should stand at the heart of any University; questions of truth, meaning, being and reality. This has meant that my interest in religion has always been inseparable from my interest in philosophy. I remain convinced that exploring these questions solely through religion or solely through philosophy is unduly restrictive, and that some of the most creative and stimulating thinking takes place at the frontier between religion and philosophy. Most of my research and teaching is located precisely at this intersection.

I believe that these kinds of ‘big questions’ are perennially important for reflective human beings, and universities are places in which they can most fruitfully be explored. Contemporary society is framed by all sorts of assumptions that are rarely questioned but perhaps should be. Both religion and philosophy are discourses that cause us to question so much of what we would otherwise take for granted. They provoke us to think differently, to see the world differently and to challenge the values that would otherwise unquestioningly prevail. When religious and philosophical reflection causes us to question the values that prevail in our world, this leads inevitably to the domain of the political as well, and much of my recent work has been examining the political dimensions of philosophy and religious thought. This makes the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster a particularly appropriate one in which to pursue both my teaching and my research.

It follows from all this that I teach my students not simply to acquire new information or to learn new facts, but actively to think. Such thinking allows students to challenge conventional thinking for themselves. It also allows them to articulate their own points of view and to defend these through the development of rigorous and thoughtful arguments. As different perspectives and arguments actively confront and engage each other, we all advance further in the collective pursuit of truth, a pursuit that is at the heart of both religion and philosophy.
Growing up in India, surrounded by all of the colourful religious festivities, impressed upon me a fascination to understand how variably we all relate with the supernatural and divine, expressing our spirituality in distinct ways. This curiosity propelled me to take the study of religion and its place in society seriously. Soon I recognised the plurality and diversity of religious expressions around me were so vast that I decided to pursue it through my own faith tradition, Christianity, making it a journey of self discovery. The complex yet creative mixture of society and religion in India provides a fertile ground for my continuing research.

Our globalised world communities are not only from different co-existing cultural backgrounds but also from various religious and faith-based communities making up our society. Having been predominantly a 'Christian' nation, Britain needs to come to terms with this changing 'faith' landscape. The growing presence of multiculturalism and multi-faith communities calls for a better understanding of ourselves and our neighbours. The study of religion is all the more important in university environments where students prepare themselves to face often socially polarised views on religion and possibly challenge them in due course. Teaching for me is a genuine process of sharing knowledge and enabling students to broaden their horizons so that they will be able to see the world differently. I feel there is a biographical element to teaching 'religion', which makes the subject lively. I find multi-disciplinary approach in studying religion hugely helpful.

I became interested in the study of religions after the American Embassy in Iran was taken hostage in 1979, which subsequently led to the Iranian revolution under Khomeini. My father was posted to Tehran at that time and I witnessed a campaign of civil resistance and demonstrations. I initially studied international relations and politics as an undergraduate student, but changed the course of my study because I realised the power and significance of religion in deciding the direction of the country’s future. I witnessed the power of religion again in Burma (Myanmar) where I was conducting fieldwork in the 1980s. I fortunately left the country a few weeks before the mass uprising in March 1989. It is strange not to be interested in religion when it is such an integral part of public debate and the multicultural society in which we live. Religion, whether we consider ourselves religious or not, is still very much part of our identity and we cannot dismiss the historical legacy that we have inherited. Having said that, most of my friends back home in Japan say that they are ‘not religious’ and not interested in religion at all, although they are always visiting shrines and collecting protective amulets. I think it is very important to be interested in religion and know what religion can do. There are so many challenges teaching religion at university in the UK today. But I still think the environment in UK higher education is better than in many other parts of the world in terms of the intellectual freedom we are allowed and the potential to teach religion in a creative way.
I was a student in the mid-1970s when Britain was becoming more religiously diverse as Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and migrant Christians began to settle. There was also an interest among young people in meditation, yoga, alternative spirituality, and the East more generally. I visited many places of worship, went to festivals, and met people from different religious backgrounds. Religion in Britain was undergoing many changes, and I wanted to understand, teach and write about them.

Religion is an important issue to study because it is vital for understanding society and politics both historically and at present. It is also central to personal identity for many people in Britain, and even for those who are ‘non-religious’, it is important for helping them work out their own ideological position. Beyond Britain, religion is often at the heart of social and political life, and the globalisation of religion means that there are interconnections between what happens here and elsewhere. We can’t understand ourselves without knowing about others.

Why is religion worth studying, particularly in relationship to politics and philosophy? Insight into religion, what it means for individuals today and for contemporary public life, and how it was shaped and lived historically is of great value in employment because so few people know anything about it. When questions are asked about the nature or role of religion, or about equality and religious rights, you could be the one to answer them, whether they arise in teaching, the charity sector, the law, the NHS, local or national government, or in business.

I first became interested in Religious Studies at A level, when I took a course on ‘Religious Knowledge’, which was solely based on the Bible. Subsequently, I went to Edinburgh University intending to study Divinity. In my second year a brand new degree in Religious Studies was offered and I managed to change course without adding any extra time. I had taken a couple of sociology modules so then went on to study sociology. I later combined these two interests with an empirical study of church schools for my PhD. By then I lived in Cornwall where new church schools were being built so that parents had a choice – I wanted to know whether these schools made a difference to children’s religious beliefs and values. I have kept an interest in religious education but also research public values and attitudes in other fields, particularly towards genetic technologies.

Religion has not, as expected, curled up and died in modern societies. It would be difficult to argue that religion is irrelevant in any society; in fact religion seems more important than it was for understanding world affairs. So it is easy to argue that you can’t understand the world without taking religions seriously. But the most important reason for anyone to study religion at university is that they find the subject fascinating and want to learn more about it.

I want students to be interested and enthusiastic and rush out of lectures to do their own research - so I try to convey my own interest and enthusiasm in the classroom (I may not always succeed!).
Shuruq Naguib: Islam; Qur’anic exegesis; modern Interpretation of the Qur’an; Islamic Ritual Jurisprudence; Muslims in Britain; Gender and Islam; cross-cultural ethics

The revival of Islamic discourses in the Muslim world in the 1970’s and the 1980’s encouraged a widespread return to the Islamic religious tradition to justify certain normative models, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. That is when I became interested, as many young Muslims, in the study of Islam’s history and thought. My initial studies of pre-modern Islamic texts made me realize that the contemporary revivalist efforts to produce monovalent readings of Islam on many issues including gender are problematic. This culminated in my PhD thesis on multiple meanings of ‘purity’ in the Qur’an in light of pre-modern Muslim interpretations. Once deep into the thicket of the Islamic tradition, it became clear to me that women played an important role in shaping that tradition, past and present, and that more research needs to be done in that area to understand women’s involvement as well as their marginalization. The academic study of Islam and the reconstruction of a Muslim theology that recognizes female religious authority became lifelong commitments. Anyone who wants to make sense of the role of religion in global and national politics needs to study Islam. As a world religion, it has given rise to many contemporary movements which challenge processes of secularization. Many of these movements and their political theologies have had an impact on politics and culture worldwide. Courses on the Islamic textual tradition can, for example, help a student understand important aspects of the ongoing Arab revolutions, particularly the rise of the Islamists to power in Tunisia and Egypt. Islam has also become a religion of Europe and Britain, and there is no doubt that a good understanding of society, culture and politics in modern Britain today requires some understanding of Islam. Multicultural relations and integration are recurrent issues in national politics mainly in reference to Islam. Muslim practices such as veiling have become key issues for thinking about and negotiating cultural identity in Britain ...

I am originally from Egypt and, in addition to my academic life, I greatly enjoy motherhood.

Christopher Partridge: new religions and alternative spiritualities; religion and popular culture; popular music and the sacred

Having been brought up a Methodist and since become a Quaker, as far back as I can remember ‘religion’ has been an important part of the way I have experienced and interpreted the world. Of course, I am not alone. The everyday lives of many people and certainly the societies in which they live are, positively and negatively, shaped by religious belief and practice. As such, the study of religion has always struck me as an enormously important pursuit. More specifically, my own research has increasingly focussed on the role culture plays in the shaping of sacred commitments in the modern Western world. I am particularly fascinated by popular music’s role in this respect, as well as by the role alternative or non-mainstream beliefs have played. What do experiences of paranormal say about the world in which we live? What are we to make of the prevalence and diversity of alternative spiritual beliefs? How do people become acquainted with such ideas? I want to make sense of the world in which I live and, it seems to me, I cannot do that without attending to such questions. Most importantly, however, I am convinced that understanding and appreciating the way other people view the world makes for a better society.
Ian Reader: Japanese studies; pilgrimage; popular religious practices in Japan; religion, violence and terrorism; media and religion

Religion is an important field of study anywhere. There are many debates over what ‘religion’ is (or is not) and there are many different ways of understanding the term. Yet in whatever forms it takes or however one tries to define it, issues of commitment, belief and practice play significant roles in shaping identities, creating divisions and sometimes fostering better human interactions, as well as influencing politics, social structures and much else. One cannot properly fathom the human condition and human world, or specific societies and cultures without understanding how, in what ways and why people are motivated by religious feelings.

Why, for example, do people travel long distances to visit a place that is said to be ‘holy’? Why do some people commit terrible acts of violence yet see this as legitimated by their religious beliefs or see their acts as being done on behalf of a religion? Religion is so intrinsic to the ways people act and the ways societies have developed that to ignore it is to reduce our knowledge of the human condition in all its often strange but always diverse ways.

One of the biggest problems I see in the UK today is that it has become increasingly monolingual and insular in attitudes. We need to broaden our outlook and know about the rest of the world, since it is often developing in ways that will shape our future. I believe we have to constantly challenge ourselves and be on the lookout for new ways to do so—whether changing jobs regularly, traveling, learning new languages, shifting one’s research focus, engaging with different groups of researchers and fields of study. The biggest threat to us in academic terms is the potential for complacency.

Linda Woodhead: contemporary religions; religious change; sociology of religion; Christianity and the churches; alternative spiritualities; religion and politics; religion and social policy

I grew up near Glastonbury in Somerset, which is a centre for alternative spirituality in the UK. But at different times I attended a very old-fashioned Anglican school, a strict Catholic convent school, and a secular state school. It was this mix which got me interested in religion. And ever since then, I have been fascinated in how people’s beliefs shape their lives, how different those beliefs can be, and how and why they change over time.

I studied Theology and Religious Studies at Cambridge, then spent some time in India doing research on the roots of alternative spirituality. At Lancaster I have specialised in the sociology of religion, because of my interest in understanding how religious change relates to other changes in society (in forms of association like the family, in politics, economics, the media and so on).

Someone once said that every scholar is ‘chasing a lion’s tail’, and the tail I have always been trying to grab hold of is religious change. I’m convinced that religion has changed profoundly in Britain (and many other countries) since the 1980s, and I’m interested in understanding this change, and why it has come about. That means looking closely at what has happened to the churches, to religions like Islam brought by migration, to new forms of spirituality, and to secularism. It also means trying to relate these changes to what has been happening in society more widely – like the growth of the internet, disillusionment with party politics, new pressures of work. It’s a great subject to study, because it involves making sense of the world we live in right now, and what is happening under our very noses.
What Our Former Students Say About Religious Studies At Lancaster

In an increasingly global world and an increasingly multicultural society, those with knowledge of other faiths, beliefs, philosophies and cultures are highly valued by many prospective employers. Religious Studies is recognised as a high quality degree which equips graduates with a wide range of skills in analysis and human interaction. This is much appreciated by prospective employers in both the private and public sectors. Lancaster University is ranked 5th in the UK for graduate employability according to data from the 2012 Complete University Guide.

Graduates from Religious Studies at Lancaster have gone on to pursue a wide range of careers, including: nursing, welfare rights activism, criminal justice worker, human resources, business executive, secondary school teaching, translator and interpreter, paramedic, barrister, curator, and employee of the Home Office, among others. Here’s what some of our former students say about what they are doing now and how they remember their degree at Lancaster:

In purely practical terms, my studies equipped me with academic rigour. But most importantly, they gave me empathy. Born and brought up in the United Kingdom, I have lived and worked in West Africa for the past nineteen years. Currently, I am the Head of Communications for the (UK) Medical Research Council in The Gambia. My Religious Studies degree gave me a head start in negotiating our pluralistic world.


There is something to be said about being in an environment that makes you want to be a better person, in all aspects of life, not just in academia. I subsequently qualified as a barrister and am employed as an in house Crown Advocate with the Crown Prosecution Service. My studies at Lancaster gave me the ability to analyse and process large amounts of information to a deadline. My study of world religions and in particular Islamic Studies left me with an understanding and interest in contrasting religion and politics, particularly of the Middle East. Also, the opportunity to spend part of my degree studies in Bangalore in India was an incredible academic opportunity. The decision to study Religious Studies at Lancaster University was perhaps the best investment of my life.

We are deeply committed to both teaching and research. All staff are engaged in both activities. We believe that students learn best when their teachers are the people who write the books which are shaping the discipline, and that research benefits from being tested out in the classroom.

**Religion and Change in Modern Britain, edited by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto**
Based on extensive and wide-ranging research, the various chapters and case studies together present the most complete picture to date of the broad and changing British religious landscape of the postwar decades; from new Christian forms and the settling of Islam, Hinduism, and other religions in British society to new public ritualizations and the spiritualities in youth cultures and popular music.
This is a must-read for anyone even remotely interested in the topic - Peter Beyer, University of Ottawa, Canada

**Indian Philosophy and the Consequences of Knowledge: Themes in Ethics, Metaphysics and Soteriology, by Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad**
Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's new book, Indian Philosophy and the Consequences of Knowledge, is one of these pioneering works that endeavours to offer new ways of thinking through Indian philosophy while embracing its own hermeneutics, and at the same time bringing aspects of Indian philosophy to a wider audience.
This wonderful text paves the way for future studies in Indian philosophy - Sthaneshwar Timalsina, San Diego State University

**The Character of the Self in Ancient India: Priest, Kings and Women in the Early Upanishads, by Brian Black**
This is the finest, most insightful, and most theoretically sophisticated book on the Upanisads I have ever read. For years I have had students come up to me after class and ask me to recommend a book on the Upanisads and I never could. Now, at last, we have a long critical read of these texts from a multitheoretical perspective: sociological, historical, rhetorical, and gendered - Jeffrey J. Kripal, Rice University
Groundbreaking Research

*Summoning the Spirits: Possession and Invocation in Contemporary Religion,*
by Andrew Dawson

An indispensable resource for anyone interested in the nearly universal human desire to establish direct contact with unseen powers and forces, however understood - Michael F. Brown, Professor of Anthropology, Williams College, Massachusetts

Richly nuanced and wide-ranging, yet sharply focused -- Susan J. Rasmussen, Professor of Anthropology, University of Houston

*Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture,*
by Christopher Partridge

This is an important book...Partridge's contribution to this discussion is original and well argued. The book works well as an introduction to sociological debates for students new to this area, but also offers a distinctive, well-argued perspective on these. The book should also attract significant interest amongst those involved in exploring the nature of missiology for Western culture....The book deserves to be a focus for ongoing debate -- Gordon Lynch, Expository Times

*The Location Of Religion: A Spatial Analysis,*
by Kim Knott

Kim Knott’s *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* might be the book that offers the sociology of religion a first step towards ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’; one that could help us move towards a post-Christian understanding of religion and secularisation -- Adam Possamai, University of Western Sydney
A Short History of Atheism, by Gavin Hyman

Gavin Hyman offers a much needed analysis and evaluation of the atheism that arose during the Enlightenment and extended itself into the modern and contemporary periods. He does so with a fairness and balance that illumines the subject rather than obfuscates it ... This is a lucid, engaging and astute work of historical and philosophical analysis -- John D Caputo, Syracuse University

Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan, by Ian Reader and George Tanabe

The authors are firmly rooted in the real world of the actual conduct of religious life, and readers will find this common-sense approach, gracefully and clearly written, a welcome and readable treatment of a pervasive theme of Japanese religious life ... This study makes a solid contribution to ethnographic research on Japanese religions by taking the search for practical benefits seriously and demonstrating convincingly that genze riyaku is an important key to many aspects of Japanese religious life -- Japan Quarterly

The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism, by Gavin Hyman

UFO Religions, by Christopher Partridge

Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata, edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black

Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku, by Ian Reader
Religious Studies Textbooks

In addition to cutting edge research that helps shape the field, Religious Studies staff members have written some of the key textbooks on religion used throughout the UK and North America.

Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations, edited by Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami and Christopher Partridge

This is a remarkably comprehensive guide to the study of religion in the contemporary world. It provides clear explanations of key terms and useful accounts of major religious traditions—such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam—as well as newly commissioned chapters on contemporary practices that fall beyond the boundaries of religious institutions—such as Spirituality, Popular Culture, and Secularism. A wonderful book that is perfect for classroom use -- Thomas A. Tweed, author of Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion


This book is instantly accessible in its approach without being in any way condescending or an oversimplification. Each of the chapters tackles a crucial issue or web of interconnected issues, none of them straightforward and yet all conveyed with an elegance of simplicity that belies their inherent complexity -- Julia Leslie, School of Oriental and African Studies, London

Christianity: A Very Short Introduction, by Linda Woodhead

Sociology of Religion (SCM Core Text), by Andrew Dawson

Eastern Philosophy, by Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad

Introduction to World Religions: Study Edition, by Christopher Partridge
Studying at Lancaster university, for me, was a life-defining experience. The religious-studies course, in particular, enabled me to see the world through different lenses, and is one that I would recommend highly. Apart from a greater understanding of the different perspectives that people have, I do believe it helped me develop empathy, which is a most important quality for journalism—a profession I was married to for a decade. With an increasing recognition of the importance of accepting diversity at the workplace, I believe that this course holds me in good stead even today, as a corporate honcho working for a leading academic publisher.

Payal Kumar
BA Religious Studies
Graduated: 1987