

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D33 Theology and Religious Studies

a. Context

The Open University's (OU's) unique media and geographical reach provides distinctive opportunities for research impact. We have a special link to the BBC: the University co-funds joint BBC–OU programmes, and releases the time of academic staff to enable them to deploy their expertise as consultants to the production teams. We have also invested heavily in other broadcast and online media. We produce widely used teaching materials informed by our research. Our extensive nationwide presence, with 13 offices in the English regions and in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, facilitates engagement and impact across the United Kingdom.

More specifically, we seek to develop impact through the networks arising directly from our research, in locations as diverse as Belfast, Glastonbury, London, Canada and India. There are three main categories of users.

- Religious groups (e.g. the Church of England Diocese of London, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the East London Mosque, the New Testament Church of God).
- Non-governmental organisations (e.g. The information network on religious movements (INFORM), public and statutory bodies (e.g. the US Army, the Charity Commission).
- The wider public, who access our research in hard copy, online or through broadcasts, or participate in our public seminars and lectures.

Our impacts – like our research itself – reflect an overarching theme of ‘Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective’ and work across a wide range of religious traditions, including animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Paganism and vernacular religion.

b. Approach to impact

Our approach to the study of religion is a non-confessional one – we do not seek directly to influence the specifically religious beliefs and activities of the groups with which we engage. Rather, we seek to have impact through promoting an informed critical awareness among religious practitioners, policy-makers and the general public of the historical, cultural and social contexts of contemporary religion, and by helping religious organisations to develop their thinking about key issues such as community engagement, finance, heritage management and legal recognition.

Six complementary approaches have been adopted.

First, we have **built on existing research contacts with** a variety of religious groups to develop an ongoing dialogue and opportunities for securing impact. For example, in March 2013, Beckerlegge was an invited funded participant at an international seminar in Kolkata on ‘International Understanding on Human Unity – Past Lessons and Present Prospects’. The event was organised by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the movement which has been the focus for much of his research work. The invitation was confirmation that the movement regards his research as significant, and the event was simultaneously relayed by video link to an audience made up of members of the public. Similarly, Harvey’s work on animism and Paganism has resulted in regular invitations to speak at events organised by these groups in the UK (for example in annual talks to the Milton Keynes Pagan Moot) and in the US (for example a recorded interview with Earth Medicine Alliance in San Francisco, available on YouTube). Bowman has twice been invited to give public lectures on her research in Glastonbury (2007, 2008), and spoke at a mixed practitioner/academic event at The Glastonbury Symposium in 2011.

Second, Wolffe (assisted by Maiden, Sutherland and Moorhead), has led **planned programmes of knowledge transfer and public engagement**, in projects entitled ‘Building on History: the Church/Religion in London’ and ‘Protestant–Catholic Conflict: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Realities’. These have included seminars, conferences, and the development and promotion of online resources. A more detailed account of this work forms part of Case Study 1.

Third, we **supervise PhD research by – and in collaboration with – religious practitioners and stakeholders**, which will enhance their subsequent practice. For example, Naomi Stanton’s

Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) under the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)/ Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) programme has both informed the ongoing work of the original project partner, Christian Education, and her own subsequent training of youth workers as a lecturer at the YMCA College; Sarah Flew gave a presentation on her PhD research to the London Diocesan Board of Finance. John Wolffe is currently co-supervising (with Janice Holmes in the History Department) another AHRC CDA student in partnership with the Irish Temperance League.

Fourth, in May 2013, the Religious Studies Department held a **major conference on 'Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective: Engaging Outside Academia'**. Its aims were to showcase previous work by ourselves and others, strengthen existing strategic relationships and provide a springboard for future thinking about impact in the subject area. This builds on a departmental track record in previous review periods of hosting international conferences which foster dialogue between scholars, practitioners and practitioner scholars. The conference attracted over 70 registrations, including representation from diverse organisations such as the British Humanist Association, the Church of England, INFORM, the Pagan Federation, Westbury Arts Centre and the YMCA. It generated extensive and productive discussion, very positive feedback and considerable demand for further similar events.

Fifth, **publications and OU teaching materials informed by our research have been adopted in other institutions**. UK universities recommending our publications to students include Birkbeck, Cambridge, Manchester and Middlesex, and internationally they feature on reading lists in countries including Argentina, Canada, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Singapore and the USA. Such usage is indicative of the widespread assimilation by students of ideas shaped by our distinctive contributions to research on modern British religious history and to the study of contemporary and vernacular religion.

Finally, there is **direct engagement with broadcast, online and print media**. Wolffe, Harvey and Sinclair drew on their research to serve as academic consultants for two major BBC–OU series: 'History of Christianity' (2009–10) and 'Divine Women' (2012). They commented in detail on scripts, and viewed and gave feedback on the edited programmes. They were able to ensure academic rigour, correct potential errors or distorted interpretations, and identify and rectify passages that were potentially, if inadvertently, offensive to particular groups such as Muslims or Roman Catholics.

The six-part 'History of Christianity' was viewed by an average of 430,000 people in its initial screening on BBC4, and by an average of 1.1 million when repeated on BBC2. There were nearly 550,000 iPlayer downloads and over 20,000 people completed an online survey, which offers significant evidence of serious engagement with the themes of the series and of contemporary attitudes to Christianity. The data generated also serves as raw material for ongoing analysis, thus illustrating our capacity to 'close the circle' from impact back to new research.

The three-part 'Divine Women' series was viewed by 2.77 million people and there were over 260,000 iPlayer downloads. The associated website has been visited by over 30,000 individuals. A very low 'bounce rate' of 14.7% and a high average stay of 7.36 minutes is indicative of considerable user engagement.

Tremlett developed a series of four short films, '60-Second Adventures in Religion', based on research in the department. These were launched in September 2012. They are available for viewing via YouTube, iTunes and OpenLearn, the OU's own free open access online learning platform. By March 2013, they already had nearly 200,000 viewings.

Colleagues have also given interviews to radio stations: for example Bowman to BBC Radio 4's *Beyond Belief*, broadcast on 30 January 2012; Harvey to BBC Radio 4's *Today*, broadcast on 21 June 2013. Their work has also been publicised in articles in significant non-academic publications, for example *The Church of England Newspaper* (October 2010, Maiden and Wolffe) and *Frontline* (a major Indian newspaper, Beckerlegge, February 2013).

The academic culture in the Faculty of Arts is strongly supportive and facilitative of impact-related activities. The faculty has developed strategic partnerships with key national cultural institutions, including the British Library, the National Library of Wales and the Tate. It hosts a Digital

Humanities thematic network, which has a strategic role in advancing online pathways to impact, and seconds a senior member of academic staff as media fellow (50% FTE) to work on developing programme ideas and to advise on the broadcast potentialities of research.

The OU provides the requisite financial resources for travel, facilitating essential networking, offers media training and press releases, and technical assistance with website development and video and audio production. It also provides physical locations and logistical support for impact-related seminars and meetings in OU premises across the UK.

c. Strategy and plans

Over the next five years, the UoA will continue to develop the impact of its research through pursuing and extending the six strategies outlined above.

1. We will continue to develop strong sustainable relationships with religious groups, both as resources for our research and as channels for impact. In addition, we will sustain and develop relationships with other interested parties, including the Charity Commission, English Heritage, Lambeth Palace Library, the National Archives and the Religious Archives Group. We will develop existing relationships with schools, to enable children to engage with our research and contributing ideas towards a ‘creative curriculum’ on the history and contemporary experience of religion in their locality.
2. We are seeking further funding to enable us to continue and expand the work of the ‘Building on History: Religion in London’ project. We shall also make full use of the OU’s wider regional and national structure to hold seminars publicising our research and to interact with users in a range of locations across the UK. Wolffe is planning a series of seminars across the UK and Ireland in late 2014, and is contributing to the 2013–14 Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series at the Northern Ireland Assembly.
3. We will pursue further academic–practitioner partnerships through PhD research, both by seeking funding for full-time students through CDAs, and by accepting suitably qualified practitioners as part-time students.
4. We shall build on the success of the 2013 conference by holding another conference with similar objectives in 2017, highlighting interchange between academics and practitioners.
5. Research will continue to feed into the development of OU courses, notably *Why is Religion Controversial?*, which launches in late 2013. Wider impact will be secured through the publicly accessible audio-visual and other materials which will be made available on OpenLearn, and potentially on FutureLearn, the OU-led consortium delivering massive open online courses to a global audience.
6. We shall further exploit the University’s relationship with the BBC, and its expertise in producing audio and video resources, to ensure extensive publicity for our research. We will expand online resources to publicise our research, seeking – for example through online surveys and blogs - to promote an interactivity and responsiveness that generates further impact.

In addition, we will engage fully with wider interdisciplinary networks for promoting research impact, especially the work of the OU’s own Champion for Public Engagement with Research, Dr Richard Holliman, and that of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. These activities will not only help to generate impact but will also sustain networks, expand resources and stimulate ideas that will be of substantial value in shaping and informing future research.

d. Relationship to case studies

The two case studies submitted exemplify, in particular, the first two approaches outlined above. ‘Understanding alternative and vernacular religions and spiritualities’ illustrates how impact has developed organically from the research process. ‘Applied religious history: understanding the past to inform the future’ illustrates a more planned and structured process, supported by external funding.