

Religious Studies in South(ern) Africa - An Overview

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Abstract

By the end of 2003, two major developments stood to reshape the study of religion in South Africa. The first is the merger of universities and other tertiary educational institutions, which has made the position of smaller disciplines quite precarious. The other development is more positive. According to a new government policy on the role of religion in education approved in August 2003, Religious Studies will be presented at school level in two forms. Firstly, it will be present as one sixth of the curriculum of the learning area known as Life Orientation, which will be compulsory for all learners from grade 0 to 12. It will also be presented as a full examinable subject, to be called Religion Studies, in Grades 10 to 12. This paper discusses previous overviews of the state of Religious Studies in South Africa, maps the current state of the discipline in the country and some of its neighbours, and extrapolates possible future developments. In this, it is an attempt to create a baseline against which future evaluations of the discipline in South(ern) Africa may gauge the progress (or lack thereof) made in this field after the developments sketched above have come into full force.

Introduction

Two major developments within the field of education occurred by the end of 2003, both of which stood to reshape the study of religion in South Africa. The first one is the merger of universities, technikons¹ and other tertiary educational institutions. This move, which was mandated by the Department of Education, i.e. the government, is intended to reduce the number of institutions spawned

during the apartheid era to a more manageable number and is certainly a laudable goal in a mid-sized country. Its effect on small disciplines like Religious Studies, however, is uncertain. A newly-merged institution like the University of Kwazulu-Natal, for example, inherits five campuses from the two former universities from which it was formed.² Religious Studies is offered at two of these campuses, but will that continue to be the case? Already, at only one of the two campuses is it available as a major subject. At the present time, however, even where mergers have been formally completed, there has not yet been occasion for the rationalisation of the merger components' respective offerings. The other major development is more positive. According to a new government policy on the role of religion in education approved in August 2003,³ Religious Studies will be presented at school level in two forms. Firstly, it will be present as one sixth of the curriculum of the learning area known as Life Orientation, which will be compulsory for all learners from grade 0 to 12. It will also be presented as a full subject, to be called Religion Studies,⁴ in Grades 10 to 12 making it on par with long-established subjects such as English, Mathematics and so on. This is something that has been advocated in South Africa for a long time: the earliest reference to it I have found is by Harold Turner (1980: 13), who calls for an abandonment of the Constantinian model of school/church entanglement and an adoption of a Religious Studies model (which includes the study of Christianity, but in a "non-confessional" way) at all educational levels in South Africa. Twenty-five years after Turner's visit, his vision is finally about to become reality.

Many problems remain in the implementation of this second development. Resistance exists among some educators whose only training is in Biblical Studies, or those who would prefer single-faith religious instruction as a matter of principle, as well as among sectors of the parent population. Curricula are being worked out in often laborious consultation processes. Nevertheless, we can postulate that with the school situation giving Religious Studies students a clear employment option, the subject should flourish in the years to come. In the South Africa of late 2003 to early 2005, Religious Studies therefore finds itself caught between these two conflicting tendencies. The final outcome will only become clear a decade and more from now. But whether Religious Studies can by then be said to have progressed or regressed (and ignoring for the moment the crude evolutionist model those terms imply) will depend on knowing where the discipline was at the earlier stage that is today. I therefore intend to chart the current state of Religious Studies in South Africa, mainly in terms of tuition but also with some reference to research. This will give us a static view, a "snapshot" of the discipline as it stands before the developments outlined above have had time to exert their influence. In this, I will also touch on developments in some of our neighbouring states in Southern Africa. Not only will developments in South Africa undoubtedly affect them, but in many respects they are ahead of us and South African scholars of religion can learn much from them.

Some Earlier Reports on Religious Studies in South Africa

Among the earliest reports on the state of our discipline in South Africa is that of Harold Turner (1980). His report is mainly a reflection on his visit to the country in 1979,⁵ and is somewhat limited to observations of the particular institutions that he actually visited. For example, at that stage Religious Studies was already being developed within the Faculty of Theology at the University of South Africa (Unisa) by Verryn and Krüger, a fact which remains unnoticed by Turner in his article. Turner states that he was mainly hosted by Afrikaans institutions and individuals (1980: 3). This may have influenced his views - at the time, the Unisa theological faculty was seen as too liberal by many in the Afrikaner establishment.⁶ The year 1979 also saw the establishment of the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ASRSA), which remains today the IAHR⁷ affiliate for the region, and the following year saw the publication of the first issue of the ASRSA journal *Religion in Southern Africa*, since renamed to *Journal for the Study of Religion*.⁸ Professor G C ("Pippin") Oosthuyzen was the instigator and main driving force behind the establishment of ASRSA, and in 2003 he was awarded honorary life membership in recognition for his efforts. Turner's observations can be summarised in six concise statements or propositions that form the subheadings of his article:

- I South Africa is a very religious country.
- II In terms of the racial and religious situation, South Africa has perhaps more in common with Britain than with any other country in the world.
- III South Africa is perhaps the most "representative" nation in the world.
- IV Higher Christian Studies are most extensive and influential, in proportion to the white population they serve, than in any other part of the world.
- V Theological scholarship is not as productive, or as relevant, to South Africa as it might be.
- VI Theological work, especially in South Africa, needs Religious Studies which is still at a rudimentary stage of development in this country.

Proposition I. From our perspective 25 years on, we can say that proposition I remains true: The majority of South Africa's population is not just nominally religious, but regularly takes part in religious activity of some kind. South Africa is not the best place to study the corrosive effects of secularisation.

Proposition II is highly debatable. Since Turner's visit, and particularly since 1994, South Africa has increasingly become aware of its position as a leading Third World nation and similarities to Britain, where they do exist, are regarded

as a mere historical happenstance.

Proposition III is demonstrably correct if we understand it in terms of religious distribution, and serves as a basic methodological premise for South African Religious Studies scholars.⁹

Proposition IV needs to be qualified: Theological studies, and more especially Biblical Studies, have seen sharp drops in student numbers and general influence over society in the last decade.

Proposition V may also need to be qualified: slowly but increasingly, the influence of Black, Feminist and Womanist theologies are changing the face of theology's engagement with broader South African social structures. In Religious Studies too, we can see increasing focus on local research possibilities and issues rather than the continual hankering after "international" approval that is the hallmark of a colonial mindset. Of course, this introduces the danger of a new parochialism.¹⁰

Finally, we come to Proposition VI: the question whether Religious Studies in South Africa is still "at a rudimentary stage of its development". I do not propose to enter into a direct comparison of today's situation with that in 1979, but I trust that our overview of Religious Studies in South Africa, at present, will show that it is no longer the case.

Moving ahead a decade, we find Martin Prozesky's (1990) article on Religious Studies in South Africa, which focuses mainly on research issues and the position of Religious Studies towards the religious justification of apartheid. Although no-one could have been expected to be aware of it at the time, the late 1980's and early 1990's were a period of unprecedented growth and development in Religious Studies in the country. The discipline was presented at universities like the University of the Witwatersrand¹¹ and Rhodes University, but today it is no longer offered at either of these institutions. At that time, student numbers were boosted by the fact that in the educational structures of the House of Delegates, Religious Studies was recognised as a subject that prospective education students could present as a major subject for their professional qualifications.¹² The era would even see an attempt at the predominantly Afrikaans-language Stellenbosch University to transform the Biblical Studies department into one that presented Religious Studies, an attempt that would ultimately fail. Its journal *Scriptura* has survived, but after a brief effort to transform it into a Religious Studies publication during this period, it seems to have reverted to its original function as a journal for Biblical Studies. Prozesky identifies definitional and methodological issues as one of the major preoccupations of the era, citing work by Hofmeyr, Cumpsty, Chidester, Krüger and others as illustrative of this tendency. And here we see a problem for Religious Studies in the country. This generation of scholars, many of whom are now retired or are at least reaching retirement age, has by and large continued to develop their methodological work, but it is not clear that a new generation of South African

scholars is arising to take this aspect further forward. To take just one example; Krüger has continued to develop his methodological thinking, first seen in *Studying Religion* (1982) and has gone on to develop, in works like *Metatheism* (1989), *Along Edges* (1995) and most recently in *Sweeping Whirlwinds* (2003), a methodology that is deeply influenced by process philosophy and especially Hua-Yen Buddhism. But his students, even those like myself who are now among his colleagues at Unisa, are chiefly working on empirical research, even if some of them developed methodological insights within their postgraduate work.¹³ Nor can we say that the efforts of these theorists has led to the establishment of distinct methodological schools centred on their respective institutions, after the German academic model. We cannot speak of a Unisa school of Religious Studies, nor of a UCT¹⁴ school. Religious Studies in South Africa tends to be a collection of idiosyncratic lone researchers. Collaborative research is the exception rather than the rule, and where it does happen, it tends to involve two researchers at most. The methodological work done by Krüger, Prozesky, Cumpsty and others serves researchers as a set of resources rather than as unifying principles. For example, the UCT library catalogue lists just one MSocSci thesis that explicitly acknowledges Cumpsty's theory in its title (Leatt 1995). Of course, Cumpsty's work has been used elsewhere by others, but this does demonstrate that a distinct formation of different schools of thought is not occurring in Religious studies in this country.

As we have seen, an emphasis on researching local material was advocated by Turner and it was equally called for by Prozesky. Other aspects of the South African situation, like the requirements for funding set by the National Research Foundation (NRF),¹⁵ further encourage scholarly commitment to empirical research and especially to local issues. Yet it would be a pity if the foundational work done by scholars like Krüger, Cumpsty, Prozesky himself, and others were to be neglected, even swept away by this new kind of parochialism. Sustained empirical research on local issues that is informed entirely by imported methodologies can hardly be the way to go for Religious Studies in South Africa. To some extent, it can be said that in South Africa the line between Religious Studies and Theology has hardened since Prozesky wrote his article in 1990. Some of the examples of research he mentions would not be regarded as Religious Studies today, for example some of the theses emanating from the theology faculty at Stellenbosch University (Prozesky 1990: 17). Islamic Studies is forging its own identity, separate from Religious Studies, as is Jewish Studies to a certain extent and on certain campuses. On the other hand, Hindu Studies, while it seemed set at one stage to take on an independent academic existence, has been forced by massive institutional reorganization at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) to reestablish itself as part of a broader Religious Studies configuration. The study of African religion, Buddhism, Contemporary Movements and so on remain firmly within Religious Studies. Every document reflects

the spirit of its times. Perhaps when Prozesky wrote, there was a perceived need to project a view of Religious Studies as a "broad church". Since then, ongoing differences over the role of religion in education, rising conservatism in many churches in reaction to the liberalisation of society in general, and the need to compete for students' attention has led to more of an estrangement between Religious Studies and Christian theology in particular. No doubt scholars of the future will find this article equally a reflection of its times.

A reverse tendency can also be observed, however. This can be seen predominantly in the efforts of theologians, mainly scholars of biblical texts, to adopt a more Religious Studies-orientated stance in their research work. However, the need to attract students from mostly religiously conservative backgrounds and the generally close relationship between theological institutions and particular churches has prevented this private interest from becoming widespread in the tuition presented and in most publications. Even a book like Spangenberg's *Perspektiewe op die Bybel* (1998), not really a Religious Studies work, but a fairly liberal interpretation of Christianity, is still capable of causing upheavals within the Christian community.¹⁶ Since 1990, the only published scholarly reflection on the state of Religious Studies in South Africa seems to have been Hans Müller's statistical analysis of the place of religion in South African tertiary educational institutions (Müller 1995). This article considers the teaching of religion at tertiary levels from all theoretical perspectives, theological as well as non-theological. Still, from it we discover that in 1995 there were six departments of Religious Studies¹⁷ in South Africa situated in liberal arts faculties, while the subject was also offered from within some of the twelve faculties of theology, often in an uneasy relationship to theological subjects such as Biblical Studies. In addition, there were two "other departments of academia religionis", which we can assume were the departments of Hindu Studies and Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville (Müller 1995: 126-127). Müller points out a number of anomalies in the South African university setup of 1995 when it comes to the study of religion. While Christianity was well catered for, there were no distinct departments of Jewish Studies or of African Indigenous Religions.¹⁸ These needs were met by departments of Religious Studies, Semitic Languages, Anthropology and so on. This situation has hardly improved since then: indeed, the amalgamation of Religious, Hindu and Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville has made Müller's critique even more widely applicable.

Religious Studies at South African Universities

Although we cannot speak of distinct methodological (in the strict sense of the term) schools in South African Religious Studies centred on particular institutions, departments at each university at which the discipline has existed for some

time have nevertheless each developed a style, a way of doing things, and this methodology (in a more lax sense) will no doubt affect how they will interact with the changes that are about to arrive as a result of the new educational policy. Can we expect a professors' revolt against the changes, or is everybody concerned happy with the way things are going? Religious Studies in South Africa today can be seen as being centred in three main locales, with a possible fourth and fifth emerging. At other universities, it survives (or has been established) as an ancillary subject to other disciplines. We shall look at these in turn. First, let us examine the three main centres, in no particular order.

University of Cape Town (UCT)

Religious Studies has existed at UCT in one form or another since 1967, making it perhaps the oldest Religious Studies presence in the country.¹⁹ The department of Religious Studies is located in the Faculty of Humanities and presents Religious Studies as a major subject for both the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Social Sciences degrees. The department also houses four journals and three research institutes. With 10 teaching and 7 research staff,²⁰ UCT certainly has one of the largest Religious Studies departments in South Africa. But this requires some qualification: this department has consistently maintained a more integrationist stance towards the study of religion than we find elsewhere in the country. If we conduct a little thought experiment in which we transpose their course offerings, especially at postgraduate level, to another major South African university, we might well see it broken up, if not into separate departments, then at least into separate disciplines of Religious Studies, Theology and Islamic Studies. And this is, in fact, exactly the division we see when we consider the department's three research institutes: the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa, the Research Institute on Christianity and Society in Africa, and the Centre for Contemporary Islam. At UCT, Religious Studies is a broad umbrella term for a variety of approaches to the study of religion, some more confessional than others, while elsewhere in the country it tends to be reserved for a more restrictive view that reflects the heritage of the phenomenological tradition. This is not the place to argue whether UCT's integrationist view of Religious Studies is superior to the more purist views we find elsewhere in the country. Arguments could be made for either position. Let us just note that this is the approach taken at UCT's Department of Religious Studies.

Even if we take a more narrow view of the nature of Religious Studies, it can be seen that there is a difference of approach at UCT. At the undergraduate level, for example, courses²¹ with names like "Religion, Ethics and Human Rights" and "Religion, Conflict and Violence" seem to dominate the curriculum (University of Cape Town 2004a: 192-197). At UCT generally there is a strong tradition of socially and politically committed scholarship, and we can certainly

see this in the Religious Studies course offerings. One does not want to imply that this perspective is absent at the other institutions we shall discuss below - if anything, the difference lies in the degree of importance that is attached to it, as opposed to institutions that favour more of a classical, "objective" approach. This heritage of committed, even activist, scholarship would see UCT well-positioned in terms of the new educational policy. The policy does not wish to educate citizens in the basics of the world's religions for its own sake, but places it squarely within the overall structure of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). Religion Education in schools is expected to contribute to socially progressive goals. For now, UCT's Religious studies establishment and governmental educational structures seem to agree on what those goals are. But governments and universities can change, and it is possible that in the long term, a divergence between the two might evolve. In that case, the same heritage of committed scholarship might lead to conflict between the two.

At postgraduate level, UCT offers an integrated Honours/MA degree by course work and minor dissertation as well as the usual dissertation-only Master's and thesis-only Doctoral degrees (University of Cape Town 2004b: 231-235).²² In terms of the history of religions, this department shows a strong focus on African religion and on the Semitic religions. The study of Asian religions is not well developed here. As we can expect from a department with three research institutes, the Religious Studies department at UCT has a proud research record. Among the notable recent research outputs can be found by following links from the department's staff web page.²³

University of Durban-Westville (UDW)

UDW was initially founded in 1961 as a university that would cater specifically for the Indian population of South Africa. For a long time its curriculum reflected this: it was the one place in South Africa where one could study Sanskrit, contemporary Indian languages and aspects of Indian culture. But even before the formal end of apartheid, Indian students were exploiting loopholes in apartheid legislation to study at white universities, while UDW itself became increasingly attractive to black students. Today, UDW is about to disappear into the newly-formed University of Kwazulu-Natal²⁴, and the ultimate position of Religious Studies at this new institution remains unclear. However, the institution of a dedicated Master's degree programme in Religion Education shows that the department is happy to see the changes in educational policy and is adapting to meet the challenge. In 2003, the University of Durban-Westville featured a School of Religion and Culture within the Faculty of Humanities. (University of Durban-Westville 2003: HU28, HU91-98) This is a combination of elements that had previously been separate departments of Religious Studies, Hindu Studies, Theology and so on.²⁵ The 2003 calendar lists 4 academics on professor level and 2 lecturers.

The school offers a single BA degree programme, which is listed as BA (Religion and Culture). At Honours, Master's and Doctoral levels, the degrees available split into two possible streams; the one being "Religion and Social Transformation" and the other "Religion Education". The MA degree can also be done either by course work or by dissertation. The following religions or areas are available for major subject purposes: African religion, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Eastern religions, Religious Literature, and Religion and Culture. The fact that UDW no longer offers formal courses in Sanskrit or contemporary Indian languages has been a serious blow to Religious Studies in the country, especially to those scholars who work in the field of South Asian religions. In today's cash-strapped academic environment, it seems unlikely that the study of classical Indian languages will be revived in South Africa.²⁶ At the moment elementary Pali is offered on an informal basis at the University of South Africa to selected Honours students, and similar informal offerings may exist elsewhere, but an inability to read original texts is likely to become a major stumbling block in this sub-discipline in the future. The same argument may be applied to a lesser degree to the study of languages like Arabic and Hebrew, which have been sharply reduced at a number of South African institutions. In those cases, however, students may be able to take the appropriate modules at Unisa and have them recognised at their own universities. UDW scholars have been active researchers in the Religious Studies field and many of them are long-standing contributors to ASRSA activities.

University of South Africa (Unisa)

Unisa is the youngest of the three main centres of Religious Studies activity in South Africa, and the only one that specialises in distance education. Five academics work in the Religious Studies sub-department of the Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, which also offers the subjects Islamic Studies and Arabic language. The department is situated in the School of Religion and Theology, which forms part of the College of Humanities. At undergraduate level, Religious Studies at Unisa offers a major subject for the BA degree (University of South Africa: 2004). Thirteen modules are presented, of which nine constitute a major subject. Religious Studies also features strongly in the "BA with Specialisation in Religion, World Views and Ethics for Life Orientation", but it should be noted that, like most of Unisa's "with specialisation in" degrees, this is fundamentally just another way of looking at the general BA degree. In the past, the Unisa undergraduate Religious Studies syllabus was quite classical in its structure, with a strict division between History of Religions and Phenomenology of Religions (and with research methodology sitting somewhat uneasily in the latter). More recently, the syllabus has been revised to reflect changes in understanding of the subject: there is now less emphasis on learning about the

big religious "blocs" and more on investigating both the historic and thematic interfaces between religions. On postgraduate level, Unisa offers an Honours BA degree that consists of five courses, an MA that can either be dissertation-only or a combination of courses and a dissertation of limited scope, and a thesis-only Doctoral degree.

The discipline was originally situated in the Faculty of Theology before it moved to the Faculty of Arts (now Humanities). This explains why there are still a few students finishing off higher theological degrees in Religious Studies. No new registrations are accepted though, and at the time of writing, Religious Studies is not a major subject for the BTh degree, as it once was. This may change again in the future now that Religious Studies has joined with the theological departments of the former Faculty of Theology to form the new School of Religion and Theology. African Religion is probably the strongest area of activity at postgraduate level. Unisa is also the centre of Buddhist Studies in South Africa and has produced work on Islam, Contemporary Religious Movements and post-modernist thinking about religion. Religious Studies scholars have consistently been among the most productive researchers at Unisa. Besides the books by Krüger mentioned above, they have produced a steady stream of scholarly articles and are currently producing a series of textbooks to be used in the teaching of Religion Studies at secondary level, in grades 10-12. Two academics from this department served as *de jure* and *de facto* chairpersons of the Standards Generating Body for Religious Studies during 2003-2005 and others have served on governmental structures such as the Minister of Education's Standing Advisory Committee on Religion and Education (SACRED). It seems unlikely that there would be opposition to the new policy from this department in the immediate future: too many of its current members were instrumental in its creation and implementation. Nevertheless, one can see that the transition from a classical, mainly British-inspired style of thinking and writing about religion to the more engaged form demanded by OBE, is causing some strain within the department.

Having examined the three old, well-established departments, we now turn to two more recent developments that show great promise for the further development of Religious Studies in South Africa. The timing of these developments indicates that the formation of the new policy may well have been a powerful factor in bringing them about, and one certainly does not see them objecting to it.

University of the Free State

The University of the Free State²⁷ currently offers Religious Studies only as an ancillary subject to theology (University of the Free State 2003). However, the intention is that it will be presented (under the Afrikaans name *Godsdienskunde*) as a major subject from 2005 onwards.²⁸ If this works out as planned, it will be a major step forwards for the discipline in South Africa. Religious Studies has never

been presented as a major subject at a historically Afrikaans-speaking university before - as we have seen, an attempt to institute it at Stellenbosch University in the 1990's did not turn out to be successful, although a demographics unit at that institution is now regularly researching religious questions. In September 2004, the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa held its 25th annual congress at the University of the Free State's main campus in Bloemfontein.

University of Venda for Science and Technology

The University of Venda²⁹ started out as the only tertiary institution in one of the so-called "independent homelands", but has certainly started to outgrow these origins in recent years. As is the case with the University of the Free State, the introduction of Religious Studies as a major subject at this university offers exciting new possibilities for the discipline in South Africa. In this case the subject replaces a variety of subjects, mostly theological in nature, and is being phased in at the moment (University of Venda 2003: 219-220). A full complement of modules is envisaged, with a particularly strong African flavour. It is not the first time that Religious Studies has existed at a traditionally black university - there was a strong presence at the University of the North for some time during the 1990s, and some courses were once on offer at Transkei University and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the appearance of Religious Studies at Venda is a sign of hope for the future of the discipline. It may well be of cardinal importance in the ongoing project of creating a more locally contextualised methodology of studying religion. A perusal of the academic staff in this department shows that most of the five lecturing staff hold theological rather than Religious Studies qualifications (University of Venda 2003: 34). But we should not be too quick to prejudge this as constituting a problem. A number of the founding fathers of Religious Studies in South Africa were themselves "converted" theologians, and it is to be hoped that history will repeat itself here.

Other South African Institutions Offering Religious Studies

Apart from the institutions discussed above, Religious Studies survives in one way or another at other South African universities, where it is presented in the form of a small number of courses or modules that are ancillary to either theological or liberal arts subjects. By lumping them together, I do not intend to denigrate them or the excellent work done by the colleagues who work there. But the future of the discipline in South Africa must surely depend on the three (and in the future, perhaps five) institutions that present it as a major subject for first degrees and that can supply a steady stream of doctoral graduates to take it into the future.

At the Pietermaritzburg campus of Natal University, Religious Studies was available as a major subject until 2002. Only four modules remain (University

of Kwazulu-Natal 2004: HM285-HM286), and two staff members to teach them. The discipline exists there mostly as an ancillary to other subjects. No official decision has been released, but it seems most likely that what is left of this department will be merged with the activities of the UDW School of Religion and Culture, and that this merger will also include the current School of Theology at Pietermaritzburg.³⁰ The University of Zululand³¹ offers four undergraduate papers in Religion Studies within its Faculty of Theology and Religion Studies (University of Zululand 2003: 17). Likewise, the University of Pretoria,³² the largest residential university in the country, offers about six modules to its Theology students.³³ Plans are afoot to offer Religious Studies to Humanities students as well, but have not yet come to fruition at the time of writing.

Religious Studies forms an ancillary subject at a number of other theological training institutions, including St Joseph's Theological Institute³⁴ and the recently established St Augustine's College³⁵, both privately owned Catholic institutions. It has only been in very recent years that private universities have been permitted to set up shop in the country, and there are now a number of satellite campuses of Australian and Malaysian institutions, as well as local institutions that augment Unisa tuition with further lectures. Religious Studies does not seem to be a priority for these universities, but that may change if the new education policy leads to an increase in demand on the part of the student bodies of these institutions. Institutions such as the University of the North³⁶ also offer some Religious Studies material within their theological structures.

Religious Studies at Non-South African Universities

Although this article deals mainly with the situation in South Africa, tertiary institutions in surrounding countries also offer Religious Studies either as a full-blown subject or on a lesser basis. In some cases, these countries preceded South Africa in broadening the teaching of religion at primary and secondary level beyond the confessional, mono-religious approach. The need for qualified educators to teach a multi-faith curriculum created the need for universities in these countries to present Religious Studies at tertiary level. Here we shall look at just two of these universities (Botswana and Namibia) in detail, but it can briefly be mentioned that similar developments are occurring in Zambia and Lesotho, to name just two.³⁷ Political and social unrest in Zimbabwe makes it unwise to include it in our survey.

University of Botswana

At the University of Botswana,³⁸ a total of 12 academic staff work in the department of Theology and Religious Studies. At first, this seems incongruous for a country with a relatively small population, but the University's calendar makes

it clear that besides the two disciplines in the department's name, the department is also responsible for teaching Biblical Studies and Philosophy (University of Botswana 2003: 144-146). Interestingly, Botswana's academic year follows the northern hemisphere pattern (July to June of the following year) rather than the southern hemisphere pattern (January to December) followed in neighbouring South Africa. In terms of Religious Studies, the University of Botswana offers the subject as a full major. The core modules it represents cover the field well, including even those religions that have scant representation in the country, while the optional modules enable students to benefit from a broad knowledge of the field. Botswana stretches its Bachelors' qualifications over four years rather than the three usual in South Africa, and does not offer a separate Honours degree. The University also offers an MA program by means of a combination of course work and a dissertation, but does not, it seems, offer doctoral qualifications in Religious Studies at this point (University of Botswana 2003: 206).

In the past, academics working in South Africa and Botswana have been greatly isolated from each other by political barriers, and Religious Studies is no exception. During the last decade or so, however, we have seen far greater contact than before: Dr Obed Kealotswe has served as vice-president of ASRSA since 2000, and the Association's annual congress was held in Gaborone during 2003. It is to be hoped that ties between Religious Studies scholars in these respective countries will continue to strengthen. Considering that there is no existing tradition of Religious Studies at either of the two soon-to-be-merged universities³⁹ in the Northwest Province of South Africa (which shares the Setswana language and culture with Botswana), the University of Botswana could well become a major centre for Religious Studies in the region.

University of Namibia

Until 1990, Namibia shared the system of Christian National Education with South Africa. Gaining independence and majority rule some years before South Africa gave Namibia a head start in reassessing the role of religion in education, and 1995 saw the announcement of a new approach to the topic (Lombard 1995). It was to be less radical than the approach eventually adopted in South Africa, closer perhaps to the British approach of the time that insisted on a prominent role for Christianity in the Religious Studies curriculum. Even so, back in 1995 it was more progressive than anything available in South Africa.⁴⁰ The newly-established University of Namibia⁴¹ rose to the task by establishing a department of Religion and Theology that offered four subjects: (1) Biblical Studies; (2) Christian Studies; (3) Religion, Morality and Society; and (4) African Religion and Culture (Lombard 1995: 112-114). The third of these was roughly analogous to what we have called "Religious Studies" thus far. The scheme set out by Lombard in 1995 continues to be used by the University of

Namibia today.⁴² Unfortunately, however, the department's five academic staff members have not managed to maintain the contacts with colleagues from elsewhere in the region that were established at the 1994 ASRSA congress in Windhoek. It is to be hoped that such links can be re-established in the near future.

Conclusion

It would be an exaggeration to say that Religious Studies is alive and well in Southern Africa. Only at a minority of the universities in the country is the discipline available as a major subject and at postgraduate level. Furthermore, even in those institutions, it tends to be one of the smaller disciplines, vulnerable to being scrapped altogether (as happened at the University of the Witwatersrand) or losing its identity during the current series of departmental mergers.⁴³ University-wide mergers also bring their own problems, as the merged entities try to rationalise the offerings on their various campuses. Nevertheless, the emergence of a new educational dispensation at primary and secondary level is a beacon of hope for the future. Not only will this alert new generations of prospective students to the existence of Religious Studies as a discipline in its own right, but it also will create the Religious Studies educator as a distinct profession within educational circles, thereby providing one possible answer to the age-old question "But what can you *do* with a degree in Religious Studies?". Certainly, the subject and its practitioners seem far more secure in countries like Botswana and Namibia, where elements of Religious Studies were incorporated into the school curricula much earlier. The three main centres of Religious Studies in the country appear to be solidly on board with the policy changes, and the two more recent developments would appear to have been established largely, if not solely, as a positive response to it. No doubt each of these five will adapt in its own way to the challenges posed by such changes.

Much remains to be debated. For example, in three to four year's time, we will start to enroll a new batch of first-year students, some of whom will already have done three years of Religion Studies at high school level, and some of whom have not. What does this imply for the standards we set for our first-year courses? Such issues have hardly begun to be debated. For now, the lure of increased student numbers beckons Religious Studies academics like a Promised Land, and the hard slog of setting up appropriate standards and writing high-school textbooks is taking up too much time to think through the further ramifications. Given all this, one may cautiously predict that the next decade will see Religious Studies making a return to campuses where it once existed, and new appearances at institutions that never offered it at all. There will no doubt be problems: already we see the discipline being presented by former Biblical Studies academics who presently have few contacts in the Religious Studies

community. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that when next I, or my successor, attempts to map the field of Religious Studies in South Africa, it will be seen that the discipline has moved on to greater things.

Notes

- 1 "Technikon" is a South African term for a institution of tertiary education that specialises in technological rather than theoretical learning, similar to the British "polytechnic". Even before the current round of mergers, technikons were moving closer to full university status when they were granted the power to award BTech degrees in the 1990's. The term is currently being phased out, with those technikons not merging with universities now starting to call themselves either "institutes of technology" or "universities of technology".
- 2 Natal University and the University of Durban-Westville. It should be noted, however, that the main Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses of the former Natal University enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy, and South Africans generally tended to think of them as separate universities.
- 3 The policy document available online at <http://www.info.gov.za/reports/2003/religion.pdf>: To discover how radical a break with established South African educational practice this policy is, see Chidester (1987).
- 4 We can expect that the government-mandated term "Religion Studies" will slowly start to replace Religious Studies at tertiary level over the next decade or so.
- 5 Turner's article is vague about the exact date of his visit to South Africa. However, since his reflections on the trip were published in 1980, for the purposes of this article we shall take it to have occurred in 1979.
- 6 See Kruger (2003: 443-446, 473-476). It should be noted that Religious Studies only became a major subject at Unisa in 1981, with the first second-year courses becoming available to students in 1982. Before that, it was presented as a sub-component of Missiology.
- 7 IAHR: International Association for the History of Religions.
- 8 The *JSR* is currently the only dedicated Religious Studies journal in South Africa, although there are progressive theological journals such as the *Journal for Theology in Southern Africa* that provide an occasional platform for Religious Studies academics. The journal *Religion and Theology* occupies a more ambivalent position between the two disciplines.
- 9 cf Prozesky (1990: 9-10).
- 10 cf Prozesky (1990: 19).
- 11 It has recently been reintroduced on a limited basis within the Education Faculty, fundamentally as an inheritance when Witwatersrand University merged with the Johannesburg College of Education. Similar limited attempts exist in education faculties at other universities, like Stellenbosch.
- 12 In pre-1994 South Africa, the House of Delegates was the racially separated legislative body for people of Indian descent. It administrated its own educational struc-

- tures, and was the only apartheid educational authority that allowed prospective educators to major in Religious studies. When Religious Studies was scrapped from the list of permissible subjects in the early 90's, it created a crisis in a number of university departments, the results of which are felt to this day.
- 13 Consider, for example, my own doctoral thesis (Clasquin 2000), in which I develop a methodological perspective on the expansion of Buddhism.
 - 14 Many universities in South Africa are known and referred to by acronym or nickname. "UCT" would be generally understood by South Africans as referring to the University of Cape Town. See <http://www.uct.ac.za>. Similarly, "Unisa" is universally recognised by South Africans as meaning the University of South Africa. See <http://www.unisa.ac.za>.
 - 15 See <http://www.nrf.ac.za>.
 - 16 See Kruger (2003: 475-476).
 - 17 These need not necessarily have borne the actual name "Religious Studies". In 1995, as today, the discipline was far from having a single name that is accepted country-wide. "Religious Studies" is probably the most common, but the older "Science of Religion" survives in places. The name approved for the teaching of the discipline at secondary level is "Religion Studies" and one may expect that this name will gradually be accepted at tertiary level as well.
 - 18 This term is no longer in use in South African academia, and has been replaced by "African Religion".
 - 19 The University of Durban-Westville would dispute this as there is debate on exactly when Religious Studies became a major subject at these institutions.
 - 20 Figures from <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/NS/facultystaff/Default.html>, accessed on 23 June 2004.
 - 21 Tertiary education in South Africa, at present, is far from uniform in structure, with universities offering "modules", "courses" and "papers" on either a semester or full-year basis. In this essay I shall attempt to use each institution's own terminology without attempting to do a one-to-one comparison of course scope and contents. Over time, we can expect that the strictures laid down by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) will lead to a more homogenous structure.
 - 22 In South Africa, it is customary to speak of a Master's *dissertation* and a Doctoral *thesis*. The terminology in some other parts of the world, notably North America, tends to be the other way round.
 - 23 <http://www.web.uct.ac.za>
 - 24 <http://www.ukzn.ac.za>
 - 25 In our general discussion of developments in Religious studies in South Africa, I will continue to use the generic term "department", even though this school does not use that particular form of subdivision.
 - 26 Since writing this article, I have been informed that modern Indian languages, at least, may yet be revived at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. (Prof P. Kumar, personal communication at 2004 ASRSA congress.)
 - 27 <http://www.uovs.ac.za>

- 28 Personal communication: Prof S.P.J.K. Riekert, April 2004.
- 29 <http://www.univen.ac.za>
- 30 Personal communication by e-mail: Mr P. Maxwell, 22 September 2003.
- 31 <http://www.uzulu.ac.za>
- 32 <http://www.up.ac.za>
- 33 Personal communication by letter: Prof D. Human.
- 34 <http://za.op.org/sjti.html>
- 35 <http://www.staugustine.ac.za>
- 36 <http://www.unorth.ac.za>
- 37 At Unisa, a number of postgraduate students are currently surveying the Zambian situation; their dissertations and theses should show how Zambia too is part of a general trend in Southern Africa to move away from a mono-religious educational culture to an inclusive and multi-religious one. Recent ASRSA congresses have also seen a number of papers on Religious Studies in Lesotho, thus far unpublished, that show the same tendency.
- 38 <http://www.ub.bw>
- 39 The Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the former Bophutatswana University. More recently, Religious Studies has been introduced at the Potchefstroom campus as a subject for Education students only.
- 40 It should be pointed out that during the apartheid era, various "independent homelands", such as Bophutatswana, experimented with injecting an element of Religious Studies into their school curricula. However, since their re-incorporation into South Africa, the documentation around these unrecognised mini-states' activities has apparently disappeared, and only anecdotal evidence could be found.
- 41 <http://www.unam.na>
- 42 See http://www.unam.na/faculties/humanities/religion_theology/courses.html
- 43 For example, my own department at the University of South Africa has in the last four years changed from a department of Religious Studies, to being one of nine disciplines in the "Department of Classical, Near and Far Eastern and Religious Studies" to, most recently, becoming one of three disciplines in the "Department of Religious Studies and Arabic". Further departmental rearrangements in the near future remain a distinct possibility.

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