

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 9 March 2018



The BASR and the Impact of Religious Studies

Podcast with **Steve Sutcliffe**, **Stephen Gregg**, **Christopher Cotter**, **Suzanne Owen** and **David Robertson** (12 March 2018).

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-basr-and-the-impact-of-religious-studies>

Steve Sutcliffe (SS): Ok. Well, thanks for waiting on a bit. Sorry about the delay in getting started. Because impact and knowledge exchange are so much the discourse of the day for academics – whether you're still a research student, or whether you've got a post – we thought it would be useful to have some kind of a brief event where each of us, from the committee of the [British Association for the Study of Religions](#), say a few words about what they thought some of the challenges and issues of that were for the study of religions, and for Religious Studies in particular. So we tried to put together this panel to tie in with a committee meeting of the British Association of the Study of Religions, which we've just come hot-foot from in the McIntyre Room. Because, of course, our committee members live all over the country. Stephen, in particular, has come up from Wolverhampton, and has spent most of the day on the train even getting here. And Suzanne, who'll be familiar to some of you as a former student here, has come up from Leeds. So we thought, “We'll be all in the one place, so let's also do some sort of outward facing event.” So we've got four brief, informal presentations from each of the folks here: [David Robertson](#), [Christopher Cotter](#), [Stephen Gregg](#) and [Suzanne Owen](#). And I thought I'd introduce it first, with just a few words on the perspective of the British Association for the Study of Religions, in so far as it represents Religious Studies scholars and Study of Religion scholars in the UK. And some of this will be familiar to some of you, but it may be less familiar to others. And we're not giving you a kind of official line. This isn't a BASR statement, it's just individual committee members' views on – what they call in the old clichéd media – the burning issues of our time. So the British Association, just to give you a little bit of history – this is me, by the way! I'm Steven Sutcliffe. And when I'm not teaching here, I've also been president of the British Association for the Study of Religion, for the last two and a half years. So the BASR began in 1954. And it was part of an organisation called the [International Association for the History of Religions](#), which was set up in

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1950. And then later on BASR, in 1999, helped to launch the [European Association for the Study of Religion](#), which is very much still in business. And we actually hosted the European Association's first annual conference in Cambridge, that year.* We began, in the mists of time, as a dozen or so members in what seems to have been a fairly clubby style, based around Oxford, Cambridge and London. But we've now grown to about 180 fee-paying members. And we've been helped very much getting the membership list nice and lean, with all paying members, with our membership treasurer Chris Cotter, here. We publish an electronic [Bulletin](#) twice a year, and we publish a [journal](#) once a year. We hold archives of the Bulletin and other papers in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and one of our members, Chris Cotter again, is currently completing a small project on the oral and documentary history of the British Association, which we hope to build on in the future, for some more grant funding, to get a larger history for the study of religions in the UK. Past presidents – in which august tradition I'm very proud to stand – have included [Ninian Smart](#), [Geoffrey Parrinder](#), [Ursula King](#), [Kim Knott](#) and [Marion Bowman](#). So, I give you this institutional background just to be sure that you realise that we've got about 60 years-plus of a learned society, promoting the study of religions in the UK. We define ourselves in this way, which is consonant with the International Association of the History of Religions, and the European Association for the Study of Religions: “The object of BASR is to promote the academic study of religions – understood as the historical, social, theoretical, critical and comparative study of religions – through the interdisciplinary collaboration of all scholars whose research is defined in this way. BASR is not a forum for confessional, apologetic or similar concerns.” Most members of our association have Social Science or Humanities backgrounds and are interested in working across religions in a comparative and theoretically informed way. Looking to analyse wider patterns in behaviours and belief including, importantly, the history and uses of the category “religion”. Our scholarship is not normatively committed to particular traditions or worldviews. And so, while some of our members include the study of theology in their portfolios, we don't practice – we don't *do* Theology *per se*. (5:00) Coming to this question of impact and engagement, we think in the life-time of the association and, of course, before the association – because the study of religions, in at least the European contexts, goes back to at least the mid-late 19th century – we think we've developed an excellent store of knowledge about religions and religion. And we transmit this store of knowledge to our students and we disseminate it in our publications. But, of course, the call for demonstrating impact and engagement out-with classroom and conference has brought us a new set of challenges, like most academic fields. So, well and good. We're just like other learned societies and disciplinary fields in the modern academy. We've got to come to grips, now, with this added level of work in already packed portfolios – this added work about engaging the knowledge we produce, and having a

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social and public impact with the knowledge we produce. However, the category religion is bound up with an especially complex set of issues and positions that permeates education, politics, church-state relations, media and law to name just a few fields. Now, I'm not arguing that there's something special about religion, but I am arguing that it's particularly heavily-freighted and loaded with assumptions and contestations that bring an unusual set of issues for us to deal with in our field. So, that's happening. At the same time, specific named religious traditions have developed their own associations since 1954- or perhaps they pre-existed 1954, anyway - their own journals and conferences, in an era of increasing specialisation. So that raises the question of what the general theoretical comparative study of religions might be for, in terms of exchanging our knowledge and impacting with our knowledge. That's really the thing that faces us as an organisation whose *raison d'être* is to work theoretically with the historical concept of religion, and comparatively across more than one tradition, for example. So that's a kind-of very brief, potted history of where BASR comes from, what it sees itself as having been doing effectively, and where we are now. The arrival of knowledge exchange, of impact – impact was 20% in the 2014 REF and will be 25% in the 2021 REF – is now a particular challenge for us. So this formal panel is specifically about what impact is Religious Studies making, and what knowledge is it exchanging? So having said that, I want to now open the way to our first contribution on that theme. And it's Dr Stephen Gregg from the University of Wolverhampton.

Stephen Gregg: Thank you, everybody. And it's always nice to be in Edinburgh. My first ever BASR conference as a not-so-young post-graduate student was in Edinburgh, I think in 2007. So it's very nice to be back here. And thank you to Steve and Naomi for organising this. I've just got a little ten minute slot and I'm going to try not to be too formal in this. Because what I want to talk to you about is based on some research and thinking that I've developed in recent conference papers and also a [recent article](#) specifically for the Bulletin of the British Association for the Study of Religions. And that's really asking questions about the place of Religious Studies in public discourse in the United Kingdom. And by that I mean political discourse, I mean media discourse, but I also mean interdisciplinary discourse. And I want to argue that we're at a juncture in the history of the academic study of religion, because I'm slightly concerned that we've become a “muted voice”. In fact you're probably familiar with [Charlotte Hardman's](#) term of muted voices. She used this to look at female participants in some of her early anthropology in the '70s and '80s. But a muted voice for Hardman: those groups whose medium of articulation is not easily grasped by other sectors of the population; groups who are marginal or submissive to the dominant power group. **(10:00)** And, quite simply, I want to argue that Religious

Studies has become a muted voice. I think this is important, particularly – and I want to agree with
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Steve – that there's nothing special about religion. I'm not having a *sui generis* argument at this point. But the fact remains that every bugger has an opinion on religion. If you are an accountant, you don't go to dinner parties and people get really het up about accountancy methodologies. A friend of mine, that did his PhD at the same time as me, was studying barnacles at Swansea Bay. When he goes to dinner parties, people don't have an opinion on barnacles in Swansea Bay. When you tell people that you're studying religion everyone has an opinion about religion, usually informed by The Daily Mail, but that's a slightly separate issue. And there's a serious point behind this, which is that those of us who would like to consider ourselves at the cutting edge of the methodology and the discipline of religious studies, are I think, becoming a muted voice. I would argue, even within the wider study of religion. This comes out, really, of changes to approaches to Religious Studies in recent years. Particularly, the shift away from the world religions paradigm towards a new paradigm which is variously called vernacular religion, lived religion, living religion, everyday religion. We're still arguing about the terminology there. And this really rests on scholarship from [Primiano](#), [Ammerman](#), [Orsi](#), [Harvey](#), [McGuire](#) – and I've made some modest contributions to this debate myself. And this examination of lived or living religion preferences people not texts, practices rather than beliefs. And this cutting edge of the study of religion, I want to argue, is absent when we look at media discourse, political discourse and, crucially, the interdisciplinary discourse when it approaches the study of religion in different contexts. And I want to give you just a couple of examples of this, because I'm very aware that we're short on time here. One example is political discourse. You may have noticed in the cabinet reshuffle last week, that one of the new faces is [Rehman Chishti](#), who is a Conservative MP of British Asian heritage. And under the old Government of David Cameron he consistently lobbied parliament to use the term Daesh instead of ISIS, when it was talking about the terrorist group in Syria and Iraq. And he did this on the grounds that he didn't want the word Islam, or anything Islamic, linked with a terrorist organisation. And I totally understand the political expediency for that, to help with community relations. But the problem I have with this – and this isn't a deep analysis of ISIS, this really isn't the time or the place for that – but the problem I have with that is the assumption behind it, which is: anyone that commits a violent act, in the name of religion, isn't a *real* Muslim; or, if we're thinking of suicide bombings in Sri Lanka in the Civil War – they're not *real* Buddhists; or sexual abuse by clergy isn't something that a *real* Christian would do. And this understanding of religion as a benign act, this essentialism and reductionism of what religion is, takes away the everyday experience of people that I hope you disagree with in the name of religion, but they *are doing so* in the name of religion. And so what we get is a confessional, theological approach to what religion is, essentialising in a benign hermeneutic circle, which I think mutes the voice of people that

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are understanding the everyday experiences of these religious practitioners – whether we agree with their actions or not. This saturates public discourse within the media, within politics. It's always faith leaders that are interviewed. It's never an expert on a particular religion. It's always an Imam or someone from the [British Council of Muslims](#) or someone from the [Hindu Council of Britain](#) and so on. And again we're preferencing this notion of confessionalism. We can see the new initiative of the [Religion Media Centre](#). We can think of religious literacy projects that have run out several universities in recent years. We can think of the Archbishop of Canterbury saying how important it was- just in the last few months he's said this- that we improve [religious literacy](#). Well I don't think anyone in this room would disagree with that. But whose understanding of religion are we going to improve the literacy of? The confessional theological understanding of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the academic study of religion in diverse contexts? This filters down through education systems as well. **(15:00)** You can think of our recent or current - I should say - education policies where the study of religion is not a part of the National Curriculum, but is still a legal requirement to teach in schools. And I have to say, I'm not an expert on the Scottish education system but, certainly in England, religion is something to do, not something to study. It is something that is practised and it is confessional from its starting point. And it concerns me that Religious Studies has become a muted voice within this discourse. Just briefly, I wanted to talk about interdisciplinary contexts. If we're changing what we mean by religion, by looking at everyday practices, by people instead of texts, practices instead of beliefs, if we're understanding mundane everyday actions as religious actions, then when we talk to an art historian or an archaeologist, or a museum curator or someone in textual analysis and we're using the same terms but meaning radically different things – how is that working in an interdisciplinary way? I wonder that we're often having divergent, not convergent conversations. But I don't want to be completely negative about this. I want to suggest that there are solutions. Talking to Steve about this informally, he's used a phrase – a couple of times – which has pricked my ears up. Steve Sutcliffe has said, “We need a Ninian Smart moment.” Which is: we need a new revolution as to what the study of religion is, perhaps beyond the Religious Studies of the late 20th century. And I think we need to start by looking at public discourse and focussing specifically on diversity. And I think it's very simple and we make small simple steps. Because, when you're trying to explain to a journalist that, actually, this is complicated – that's not what a journalist wants. They want sound-bites. They want public discourse about our academic disciplines to be simple and to be black and white. Well binaries don't work anymore, we know that. Look at religious identity, belonging, insider/outsider: it doesn't work with binaries. So, I want us to make those first small steps by focussing on diversity and particularly hyper-diversity. And if we take those small steps, perhaps – the

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Religious Studies cutting edge – this new move away from textbook essentialisms of “Christians believe this”, or “Hindus do that”, can filter down into public discourse about lived religious experiences, beyond the textbook boundaries of identities and practices. Thank you.

SS: Thanks very much Stephen, and we'll move swiftly on, so we'll have the four presentations and we'll have plenty of time for discussion about the themes arising. So we're very pleased to welcome back Dr Suzanne Owen, who studied here for her PhD, and her undergraduate degree, and is now Reader in Religious Studies at the University of Leeds Trinity. I think Suzanne is going to address the question that I mentioned of the category of religion, and how this was an important part of the expertise of our field. And she's going to be looking at a case study where expertise in how categories are used actually does have some quite important impact.

Suzanne Owen: Yes. Well, hello. So I'm going to talk about the charity registration of a particular case, showing up an area where scholars of religion have had some impact and where they could have even more. And this case, in particular, shows these points. So the charity registration is one means by which a group can claim status as a religion in the UK. As groups must also prove that their religious activities are for public benefit, as a charity, this then domesticates religion by forming groups to conform to, perhaps, liberal Protestant Christian values that religion is a force for good and benign. It is interesting to examine how groups negotiate this criteria for religion, as defined by public bodies, in order to highlight both the problems with defining religion, and how the state marginalises groups that do not fit their criteria by denying them access to certain benefits. Not only is conforming to state definitions of religion a challenge for groups but – according to [Matthew Harding](#) and his book on [Charity Law and the Liberal State](#) – in charity law we find the state marking out certain purposes as charitable according to contested conceptions of what is the good, and then extending legal privileges to those citizens who pursue those purposes. (20:00) So taking a critical religion approach, similar to the work of [Timothy Fitzgerald](#) and others, to examine critically the social processes whereby certain groups are counted as religions, as [James Beckford](#) also noted, we can really see how the category of religion operated in public discourse and then actually creates a kind of public conception of religion that gives it status and legitimacy. So, in my case, the focus is on how the category of religion operates in charity registration cases, looks at how religion is framed in charity law and is then interpreted by the Commissioners. And these Commissioners are not religion specialists, as you can imagine. They come from Law and Economics, and other areas like that. And so they are using a kind of folk understanding of religion in their conception, that's been handed down through case law. So the case of the [Druid Network](#) was for registering as a charity in England and Wales. Scotland, of course, has

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got a separate commission for registering charities, and so the Druid Network case was only for England and Wales. But there are groups in Scotland, of course, that have had their own negotiations with the state. So charity registration as a religion – as I said, this kind of folk understanding of religion has been passed down through the generations. It defines religion in a certain way, which is based on their understandings and experience of religion in this country, mainly liberal Protestant Christian. So the criteria is: belief in a Supreme Being or Entity, worship of the Supreme Being or Entity, theological cohesion and ethical framework. So every religion, or group that wants to be registered as a religion, needs to prove this criteria or show evidence of it. And some groups have failed to do this, like [Scientology](#), and the [Gnostic Centre](#), and the [Pagan Federation](#) as well. But the [Druid Network's success](#) has made it a significant case in law, because it actually altered the definition of religion in charity law, slightly. And much of their success seems to be due to the influence of scholarship on religions – particularly a statement that was sent in with the application by Graham Harvey at the Open University, in Religious Studies. And this was cited repeatedly in the decision document that you can get on line, where you can get the charity commission [decision documents](#). And they are repeatedly citing his statement as an authority for giving them a reason, a justification, to grant charity registration to the Druid Network as a religion. So the problems for the initial application by the Druid Network was they had problem trying to fulfil the criterion of belief in a Supreme Being or Entity. And the Druid Network wanted to present the concept of Nature as this Supreme Entity. And they failed in their first application but, as I said, in their second application with Graham Harvey's statement, they gained success and were able to convince the Charity Commissioners that Nature could be conceived of as a Supreme Being or Entity. And thus they've – well, in my view, they haven't actually changed the definition of religion, but they've expanded it. And this is definitely an issue, because after their registration it was thought that other pagan groups would have an easier time. And this is not the case, because the pagan federation's application came after – or one of their applications – and they still failed. And they failed on theological cohesion. And they contacted me because they knew that I was working on the Druid Network case. And, basically, I think for them they would either have to present themselves as a single religion (which they don't at the moment – they are an umbrella of different pagan groups) or to challenge the definition of religion in charity law. And, as far as I know, they are not going to do that anymore. And they've now decided to apply in a different category, like for education or some other purpose. But still, they need to register as a charity. Groups have to register as something if they're non-profit, and so forth. So, not for religion for them, it seems. And so I think the next step then is . . . [Eileen Barker's](#) also written lots of witness statements or supporting statements for groups, and she wrote one for the Pagan Federation at one time. **(25:00)**

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When they failed she wrote something along the lines, reported by [Michael York](#), that "If they don't accept the Goddess as a Supreme Being then they're sexist" or something along those lines that Michael York had reported. So we are already being employed to write statements for groups applying for charity registration as a religion. And I think the more that we are involved in such cases, the more we can influence on trying to erode the popular conceptions of what religion might be. But then, beyond that, there's also the issue of: why have a separate category of religion at all, for charities? The charity's work is for public benefit. Why does there need to be distinction between a religious charity and a non-religious charity? And this special sort-of status of religion, I think, does not make a huge sense in religion and just ties them in knots, constantly, when they're trying to define whether a group is religious or not. But there may be . . . this is an area where we can look more broadly at how the category of religion is operating, and also how it is actually a hindrance and a problem within the state as well. So we're looking at the discourse and conception of religion, so what that means, of course – the implications of that. Is there something called religion that we can see and define? And my view, of course, of that is that it is a part of discourse; it is a kind of construction. But the state does not see religion that way. It sees it as *sui generis*: as something that is unique, and something that emerges out of self in distinction to politics, economics and culture and other areas. But by doing that, you marginalise and limit the activity of religions, so that: they are not meant to be political; they are not meant to be making a profit. The problem with Scientology is that, perhaps, they're seen as a business. And that is the issue. They might not state that, but it might be an underlying bias. And the same thing . . . the way that Government gets angry every time the Archbishop says something political, because religions aren't meant to be political. So you can see how this sort-of permeates throughout the discourse. And when you study the discourses on religion, you can see these patterns. And also the conception of seeing religion as being inherently good, as well. That plays into that. So, lots of areas where we can actually look at these discourses and how they are defined in law. Thank you.

SS: Ok. So we move onto another kind of case study where this is impact going on, and in Suzanne's talk, there, it was interesting to see that a key witness to the Charity Commission is a scholar of religions, a senior scholar of religions, in the Religious Studies tradition in the UK. So there's something going on there – even if it's room for changing the definition or pushing further at that – that there's impact from the scholar. This time I've got Dr Chris Cotter here, who's going to talk about another empirical example of impact – this time within the wider scholarly arena of student knowledge, spread around the world, which is one of the criteria of the 2014 REF and will be again in 2021, probably with an expanded remit. In other words, the ability of scholars to effect classroom

understanding and pedagogical disseminations of good ideas and cutting-edge theories of research on

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religion – with a particular focus on postgraduate students. But Chris will tell you about the Religious Studies Project that he co-founded with David, here.

Chris Cotter (CC): Indeed! And as our business cards say: “The Religious Studies Project: Podcasts, Opportunities, Debate!” And this – we're actually recording for the Religious Studies Project now. We'll not be recording your discussions so feel free to speak freely. So, the RSP began in May 2011 when David and I met in the bar of Teviot Row House, and decided to record a couple of audio interviews that were passing through this very Edinburgh RS Seminar series. And, formally launching in January 2012, it's become a truly international collaborative enterprise. We're currently headline sponsored by the BASR, also the [North American Association for the Study of Religions](#) and the International Association for the History of Religions. **(30:00)** In September 2017, we became a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation – so, one of those educational charities that Suzanne was mentioning. By this point we had amassed over 250 podcasts of around 30 minutes each, with leading scholars on cutting-edge theoretical and empirical issues in the study of religion, in combination with regular response essays that reflect on, expand upon, or critique the podcast output. And, by 2017, listeners had downloaded our podcasts over 400,000 times – with new podcasts averaging over 100 downloads in their first week, growing to over 7000 for some of the more established ones. The website receives over 150,000 hits per year and we're currently followed by over 4700 accounts on Facebook, and 4200 on Twitter. But, why do podcasts at all? So, back in 2012, we could see a number of advantages to the podcast format. We thought about our own consumption of the medium. They provided us with company when engaged in lonely solitary tasks, a feeling of community, personally curated 24/7 radio station on topics of interest, and an accessible Edu-point to a wide variety of topics. But, where was the podcast for our chosen discipline the academic study of religion? So we decided to start recording the podcasts that we wanted to hear. And this format, we think, democratises knowledge and humanises knowledge production, by giving listeners a chance to hear academics talking naturally, and offering an introduction to the topic somewhere between a Wikipedia entry and a full-length journal article or book. A lot of material can be covered in half an hour, yet this can be digested at the listener's own pace, time and time again, *ad infinitum*. And, regardless of our position in the field, we all have to focus our reading, and a podcast can help fill those gaps that we don't have time to read, and help us to keep up with the latest research and current perspectives of older scholars and themes. But also – in an era of departmental streamlining and closure, and with increasing isolation and stress brought on by the marketisation of education, and by limited budgets for conference participation, etc. – regularly listening to a podcast, we hope, can provide a vital connection to the world, outside the confines of one's own institution, that can be

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academically stimulating and provide a sense of community and common purpose. And similarly – given the increasing pressure to relate research to public interest and to make sure that our research is accessible for the public and has impact – recording a podcast is a simple and efficient way to disseminate research freely and accessibly to thousands of potentially interested listeners, and in perpetuity. So, when setting up the RSP, we quickly adopted an attitude of "Don't wait to be given permission." And this attitude has pervaded our output to this day. The point wasn't merely to replicate existing academic structures and outputs but to compliment, challenge or expand upon them. And indeed, it's unclear whether we would have been able to build anything like the resource that we have, had we been bound by a department or an institution, because of the issues in justifying the cost in time and resources for each episode, slow moving checks and balances, and the inbuilt conservatism of institutions. But after we'd built up a reputation, however, it's been encouraging to see these existing academic structures engaging with RSP outputs in the form of citations, entries into course syllabi and the occasional more creative or innovative engagement. But all of that being said, it's not been plain sailing, and we've been on the receiving end of a number of important criticisms over the years – the most frequent of which has surrounded the quality of our audio, which we've been consistently improving over the year, and which I'm not going to dwell on here. But, you know – try producing your own free podcast! But related to this, it was pointed out along the way that our podcasts might be problematic, for example, for listeners for whom English was not their first language, or – how were people with hearing impairments going to be accessing all of this scholarship? So although we do still try to maintain a level of irreverent humour that's characterised the podcast from the beginning, I think we decided that bit more professionalism on our part would reduce the opportunity for things to be lost in translation. And we've also, recently, begun to transcribe our podcasts – which means that now they can be more easily cited and utilised in the classroom, and it's also softened some of the barriers surrounding spoken English. (35:00) But, of course, that adds a lot in terms of time and cost. You know a half an hour podcast can take two, three for hours to transcribe. On a different note, given our – by "our" I'm referring to David and I – our situatedness as two white, relatively privileged, relatively heterosexual British men, who've been closely associated with the RS system at the University of Edinburgh for over a decade, and who have very specific, very niche research interests, it's hardly surprising that – despite our best intentions – RSP output has not been as wide-ranging, representative or diverse as it arguably should be. A simple lack of resources is partly to blame – including time and money to fund travel etc. – as is the need for a timely and topical content. You know, if we're faced with a choice between a less than ideally representative collection of scholars or not recording

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anything at all, we've generally opted for the former. A more cynical response to all of this might be to ask: "Well, who made us the police of religious studies?" We started this free podcast, why should we bother? We've been producing this resource for over five years, in our "spare time" with very limited resources, so of course there's going to be omissions. Of course things will slip through the net. And of course we will unintentionally repeat and reinforce some of the inequalities that plague the field globally, and in our UK context. And whilst there is undoubtedly some truth in this cynical response, we are keenly aware, however, that we do have great deal of responsibility. We had this responsibility when we started, even though we may not have realised it. But this is particularly the case now, given our growing position of authority in the field and our recently acquired charitable status, and the fact that we're sponsored by some of the highest bodies in Religious Studies. It's not just our reputation that's on the line, any more. So although we might be irreverent, we hope that we do take things seriously. And we're trying to become more proactive than reactive. Controversies thus far have been relatively few and far between, and we'd like to think that when something has gone awry, and problems have been pointed out, we've been gracious, understanding and attempted to move forward in a manner that will preserve the existing ethos of the RSP whilst incorporating the critique, learning from it, and putting measures in place to ensure that things are different in future. And we can, maybe, talk more about that later. There will, of course, always be more to be done. And I'm onto my final page, now! The name Religious Studies Project – we deliberately chose this to be ambitious. As we've heard already, the discipline is at a crossroads: departments are being squeezed because of cuts and the neoliberalisation of the academy. The subject is – as we've also heard – being balkanised into departments, being made up of multiple Area Studies scholars who don't seem to have the time or interest in cross-cultural comparison, or of theoretical issues, necessarily. Religion is a more prominent aspect of public and political discourse than it has been for decades, yet it seems that our analysis is not being sought or heard. Our larger Project then, with a capital P, is to get Religious Studies the voice that it deserves. No-one knows what RS does. We can help to change that. We believe that these topics are intrinsically interesting and we know that a person talking naturally about a subject they're passionate about is always engaging. However, too few of us know how to actually go about this. And these are not skills that we're typically trained in, as academics. And, moreover, the current academic climate – we'll see how this develops – rewards us for work aimed only at our peers and all-but inaccessible to the public, in journals, conferences, committees etc. The RSP, here, has built the platform for scholars to put forward their research for free, and in a way that anyone can understand, which after all should be a central concern for the publicly funded intellectual. Thinking

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beyond podcasting and RS, what can others take from this? Because there's an important difference of approach between the RSP and traditional academic platforms. Had we sought perfect audio, an ideal website, and perfectly diverse participants from day one the project would arguably never have happened – and certainly not keeping to a weekly schedule. Like Facebook's original motto, which was: “Move fast and break things”, we use an iterative model where we try a lot of things, and improve on what’s working as we go along. And, in this way, our publishing model is closer, we think, to journalism or software development than traditional academia. But this may be an approach that academia needs to embrace in future. That one perfect journal article, behind a paywall, *that* belongs to another age. And it's only really serving your own ego, or publishing houses. **(40:00)** If you want the public to listen, they have to be able to hear you. Hmm!

(Laughter)

SS: *OK. Thanks very much, Chris. And onto David Robertson now, Dr David Robertson of the Open University is going to ask a very clearly-defined question: Who are we speaking to?*

David Robertson (DR): I hope I give a clearly-defined answer.

SG: The people in this room!

(Laughter)

SS: *Yes, well today that's true isn't it? But we're recording it for the Religious Studies Project, so it will be a podcast going out to the world.*

DR: Good

Audience Voice: As long as they speak English!

CC: Alright! I'll see you afterwards . . .

(Laughter)

DR: Edit that out please! Yes. OK. To slip into business speak for a little minute: if this has been a SWOT analysis of the field, then the previous panels have been mostly on the strengths and weaknesses, but I want to focus instead on threats and opportunities. So as not to – because I'm last – to end on too pessimistic a note, I'm going to start with the threats.

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(Laughter)

DR: But I want to say, before I start, that we honestly and seriously face the issues before us. Because I don't think you can answer a question before you correctly understand the question. In short, I think that the current muted voice of RS is not the issue *per se* but is rather a symptom of larger currents of which, I think, RS is particularly vulnerable. The first is de-traditionalisation and anti-elitism. Now I'm sure I don't need to point out to anybody here that traditional institutions are increasingly challenged. The scholar can no longer expect their word to simply be accepted as authoritative. I think this will ultimately be for the best, but it will certainly require those who are interested in speaking to the public, to realise that our voice is but one voice in a marketplace. This means we need to make the effort to speak directly to that marketplace. We need to speak and write plainly and simply and, importantly, without appeals to intrinsic authority. And we need to sometimes put aside concerns that are of primary interest to specialists. But the bigger issue is not only whether the public can hear us, it's whether they even want to. For the public to regain trust in academia, like other institutions, we need to demonstrate its value to them. Why is it in the interests of the public to have a non-confessional social scientific study of religion? And who is making that case? Secondly, is marketisation and neoliberalisation of the university: scholarship is expected to show public impact, yet academics also need to produce REF-able work for a closed academic market, as Chris was saying. This leaves us between two stools, and our working hours further squeezed. This is further the case because high fees are driving more and more attention onto the quality of our teaching. Again, another thing – but another factor that's taking our time away. The economic values of qualifications is increasingly stressed. It's not an easy case to make, for RS, to a lay audience. And emphasis on citizenship and morality now means that secondary RE now has very little to do with tertiary RS. And the third point I want to raise, is that the growth of identity politics means that public intellectuals are increasingly required to speak from a particular insider perspective – which is something that Stephen mentioned. For public discourse in religion, this favours apologetic scholarship over critical scholarship. For policy makers in such a climate, scholarship is only useful insofar as it eases tensions between identity groups. So to sum up, at present, successful public intellectuals in the field of RS are generally those whose work addresses and usually supports identity politics, citizenship and economic factors. Indeed, why would public institutions want to hear from, or support a project which seeks to destabilise ideas seen as essential to social order and to individual self-identity? We need to address this issue convincingly and seriously, beyond a REF panel or the British Academy. However, to turn to opportunities, now: the question posed by Stephen, “Why are we being ignored?” leads to the

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question, “Well, who are we speaking to?” And this is important and because different groups have different needs and different expectations. So we've heard from Suzanne, talking about the law; we've heard from Chris, talking about the university; but there are other audiences, such as education at secondary level in schools. RE is a requirement in schools in the UK, but has long been under-funded and under-supported. (45:00) Certainly, a legacy of public sector cuts and an outdated assumption that secularisation meant that it would ultimately become unnecessary anyway. The conversation has come back recently, starting with Linda Woodhead and Charles Clarke's: [A New Settlement for Religion in Schools](#), 2015, which built on the [Westminster Debates](#), but has a rather normative Christian position which troubles many RS scholars – myself included – and an emphasis on themes of citizenship, tradition and morals. It did, however, kick-start a rather long-overdue discussion. And this year's [We Need to Talk about Religious Education: Manifestos for the Future of RE](#), edited by Mike Castelli and Mark Chater, is a much bolder contribution which offers a number of manifestos for the future of RE. It argues that leaders of the RE community are struggling to make clear and safe positioning between the wreckage of old assumptions and the messy incomplete birth of the new. These changes are in part the responsibility of RS but we've been slow to take up the challenge. There's definitely been some progress, however, and a number of colleagues have been much more involved in teaching and learning issues, particularly [Dominic Corrywright](#) of Oxford Brookes, who was until recently a committee member of the BASR and [Wendy Dossett](#) of Chester. The BASR's new Teaching Award was designed to reward and highlight such work. But we still need increased clarity on the function of RE at secondary level and how that relates to the function of RS at Tertiary level. And indeed, should those subjects be necessarily related? A fourth audience is media which Steven talked briefly about, but I would like to add a slightly more positive note. The old media is on its last legs. Newspapers and TV channels, as we know them today, won't exist in ten years' time. Long-form media, however, like documentary series and podcasts, are growing year on year. We're in a unique position to be able to seize the means of production here, but it requires clear ideas, strategies and, above all, action. The traditional media still thinks in terms of sensation and conflict. But at the same time there is a move to long-form documentary work which is allowing for greater subtlety and nuance. [Ben Zeller](#)'s recent involvement with the ten-[podcast series on Heaven's Gate](#), which just concluded, is a great example. By compromising slightly, he was able to influence the series producers enough that it was by far the fairest and most sympathetic portrait ever in the media, not only of that group, but of an apocalyptic new religion, full stop. I'm at present involved in the early stages of two similar projects, although on a much smaller scale. And in both cases simply setting out some of the historical background to the

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producers, to show that these ideas do not simply just spring from nowhere, has been enough to influence the direction that the project's going in. If we consider how much time we spend on journal papers and the return on our investment, this is obviously worth doing. And there's no real reason why such projects can't be part of a REF submission – it's something that other disciplines do all the time. The final one I want to bring up, briefly, is policy-makers including security. Now [INFORM](#) has had a great influence here, as Suzanne mentioned already. But recently Kim Knot and [Matt Francis](#) of Lancaster have done some great work with the [CREST](#) project on security and terrorism. [Suzanne Newcombe](#) from INFORM and myself took part in a workshop in London for Whitehall and MI6, recently, that they organised. And, actually, the RS focus papers were among the most responded to of the entire event. Similarly the massive [European Union Project on Conspiracy Theories](#) COST also involves a number of RS colleagues who have again had considerable impact, there. Similarly, the Open University has had great interest in a proposal to start a course designed for Home Office Staff on dealing with different religions. The short version of this is that, in fact – although these people are even busier than we are – if we can make our services available, there is a ready demand: they're keen to hear what we've got to say, especially if we can make it practical. So we need to think about more realistic ways in which we can make that possible. So just to sum up, then, I want to ask a couple more questions. One is: do we really want to be public intellectuals? Are we prepared to put in the extra effort and learn to play the rules of that field? And if not, are we prepared to concede that role? And what becomes of Religious Studies in that case? Thank you.

SS: (50:00) *OK. Thanks very much, David. So that's the end of our contributions. And then the floor now will be open to some questions and observations, engaging with one or other of the informal presentations that we've heard. Just to remind you, I tried to put it into context by emphasising the history of the British association of the Study of Religions and that widely generic field of Religious Studies. We had Stephen talking about the danger of Religious Studies becoming a muted voice, where it had little effect in public arenas; Suzanne was then giving us an example, as was Chris in a different way, of actual empirical impact: REF-able impact. REF-able is this terrible kind-of adjective which we're all using now, which means "able to be submitted to the REF panel." Two very different case studies there. And David's finished off by asking a series of interesting questions about audiences as well as the threats that proceed those. So the floor is now open for any contributions, clarifications from our speakers, or observations.*

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* Correction from Steve Sutcliffe: The "EASR was founded in Krakow in 2000 and first conference was jointly hosted with BASR in Cambridge in 2001."

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing our podcast archive, or know of any sources of funding for the [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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