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Who studies religion at Advanced level: Why and to what effect?

Leslie J Francis*

University of Warwick

Jeff Astley

Glyndŵr University

Stephen Parker

University of Worcester

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Leslie J Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Centre for Education Studies

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

This study was established to profile students currently studying religion at Advanced level (A level) in terms of their demography, motivation, experience and attitudes. Eight specific areas were identified for examination: their personal motivation to study religion at A level, the personal challenges posed by the subject, their personal experience of studying the subject, their growth in understanding stimulated by the subject, the impact of their study on respecting religious diversity, the impact on their personal development, the impact on spiritual and religious development, and the connection between studying religion at A level and their personal faith. Data were provided by 462 students at the end of the first year of A-level study. Key findings demonstrated that 78% of students opted for the subject because they enjoyed their earlier experiences of religious studies in school, that 80% of students have become more tolerant of religious diversity, and that only 7% of students feel that studying religion at A level has undermined their personal religious faith while three times that number feel that it has affirmed their religious faith.

Keywords: religious studies, A level, motivation, religious development

Introduction

Current trends in religion at A level

Advanced level (A level) examinations in England and Wales have a long history embedded within the history of sixth-form education itself (Reid & Filby, 1982). A-level examinations began in the 1950s as an extension to the Ordinary level qualification, replacing the Higher School Certificate at a time when the school leaving age had been raised (Reid & Filby, 1982, p. 131). A-level examinations have long been seen as the pinnacle qualification of the school system, offering subject specialisation and preparing students to access university courses. This perception was preserved beyond the reform of A levels which occurred in 2000, and which created a two-tier, two-year, examination process of Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and Advanced 2 (A2) level. The best available evidence shows that the religious studies qualification at A level (especially at AS) has become increasingly popular, the number almost doubling since the 1990s. The subject is particularly favoured as a choice among girls (Field, 2010). A variety of options are available in A-level religious studies (including, for example, courses in any of the major world religions, biblical studies, the history of Christianity, and aspects of contemporary religion), but modules in the philosophy of religion and ethics have become the most often selected. Typical of the language used to describe the aim of the A-level religious studies curricula, which is determined by a variety of examination boards, is that of developing an inquiring, critical and reflective approach to the study of religion. Learning in the subject is focused on its potential to contribute to the intellectual development of young people.

Sixth-form religion

In the late 1960s Edwin Cox's (now classic) study, *Sixth Form Religion* (Cox, 1967) drew attention to the potential for quantitative research in this field. Cox's book on data collected in 1963 was followed by a couple of more detailed analyses of those data (Wright &

Cox, 1967a, 1967b) and by a replication study conducted in 1970 (Wright & Cox, 1971a, 1971b). Cox's book also inspired Greer's study of sixth-form religion in Northern Ireland conducted in 1968 (Greer, 1972). Greer then replicated his study at ten-yearly intervals, in 1978 and 1988 (Greer, 1980, 1989). Greer's work was further replicated a decade or so later and reported in a series of studies by Francis, Robbins, Barnes, and Lewis (2006a, 2006b), Francis, ap Siôn, Lewis, Robbins, and Barnes (2006), Francis, Robbins, ap Siôn, Lewis, and Barnes (2007), Francis, Robbins, Lewis, Barnes, and ap Siôn (2007), and Francis, Robbins, Lewis, and Barnes (2008).

Another approach to studying aspects of sixth-form religion was fostered by Astley and colleagues at the North of England Institute for Christian Education, concentrating particularly on students engaged in A-level religious studies. An annual study day for these students was held in Durham University for 25 years, covering topics relevant to their AS/A2 level syllabuses. Up to 770 students and staff attended in some years, choosing from a menu of around 40 lectures given by teachers from the universities and institutions of theological education of the north east region. Over this period, students were also invited to complete a variety of questionnaires during the course of the study day. These were designed to explore a range of topics, including religion, gender issues, well-being and personality (Francis & Wilcox, 1995, 1996, 1999; Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 1997; Wilcox & Francis, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Francis & Fearn, 1999; Francis, Wilcox, & Jones, 1999); attitudes toward science and religion (Astley & Francis, 2010) and attitude toward Christianity (Francis, Astley, Fearn, & Wilcox, 1999; Fearn, Francis, & Wilcox, 2001); and their understanding of Christianity and images of Jesus (Francis, Astley, & Wilcox, 1992; Astley & Francis, 1996; Francis & Astley, 1997).

Motivation to study religion at A level

In what they describe as a preliminary investigation, Francis, Fearn, Astley, and Wilcox (1999) explored the motivation to study religion at A level of a sample of 304 A-level religious studies students attending 56 schools in the north east of England (7 Roman Catholic state-maintained schools, 3 Church of England state-maintained schools, 30 state-maintained schools without a religious character, and 16 independent schools). Their sample comprised 63 males and 241 females; 217 were aged sixteen or seventeen, 77 were aged eighteen or nineteen, and 10 were aged twenty or over. In terms of religious affiliation, the majority (221) claimed affiliation to a Christian denomination, 8 claimed affiliation to another world faith, and 75 claimed affiliation to no religious group. In this study, Francis, Fearn, Astley, and Wilcox identified five motivational factors relevant to A-level religious studies students which they characterised as follows: the religious studies approach, the faith-based approach, the influence of school, the pragmatic approach, and future educational intentions.

The data from this study demonstrated that nearly two-thirds of the students (64%) were attracted to study religion at A level by the religious studies approach, affirming that they wanted to understand more about other people's religious beliefs. Slightly fewer than one third of the students (29%) were attracted to study religion at A level by the faith-based approach, affirming that they believed it would be spiritually beneficial for them.

Previous positive experience of studying religion at school was of key importance in attracting students to study religion at A level, with 89% affirming that they enjoyed the subject and 60% affirming that they like the religious studies staff at their school. By way of contrast, only a small minority of students, one in twenty, had taken the pragmatic approach, with 5% saying that they had been attracted to studying religion at A level because they considered that to be an easy exam to pass.

Future educational intentions had played a part in the decision to study religion at A level among one in five of the students, with 195 saying that they had made the choice because they wanted to go on to study religion at university.

Research question

In the conclusion to their preliminary investigation of the motivation of students to study religion at A level, Francis, Fearn, Astley, and Wilcox (1999) commend the benefit of building on this preliminary investigation among a larger sample of students and employing a more sophisticated instrument across a wider range of schools. This new study responds to that challenge by posing more precise research questions about both the motivation and the experience of students studying religion at A level. These research questions explore the following themes:

- the personal religious profile of the students studying religion at A level;
- their personal motivations to study religion at A level;
- the personal challenges posed by studying religion at A level;
- their personal experience of studying religion at A level;
- the growth in understanding stimulated by studying religion at A level;
- the impact on respecting religious diversity from studying religion at A level;
- the impact on personal development from studying religion at A level;
- the impact on spiritual and religious development from studying religion at A level;
- how studying religion at A level connects with personal religious faith.

Method

Procedure

As part of a wider study concerned with the experiences and attitudes of 16- to 18-year-old students engaged with the study of religion at A level, a snowball sample of 25 schools invited all their students beginning on their A-level programme to participate in a

questionnaire survey. The survey was conducted during regular class time and students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Students who did not wish their data to be included in the analysis were given the option of not submitting their completed questionnaires.

Toward the end of the first year of A-level study the schools were invited to administer a second questionnaire, and 18 of the original 25 schools did so. The present analysis is based on responses to this second questionnaire provided by 462 students.

Participants

The 462 participants comprised 129 males, 329 females and 4 individuals who did not disclose their sex; in terms of age, 86 were sixteen, 351 were seventeen, 22 were eighteen and three did not disclose their age.

Instrument

The *motivation and experience* of students studying religion at A level were assessed by a battery of focused items rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. The items were designed to reflect eight themes styled: personal motivation, personal challenges, personal experience, growth in understanding, respecting religious diversity, personal development, spiritual and religious development, and connecting with personal faith.

The *personal religious profile* of students was assessed by four questions: self-assigned religious affiliation was assessed by the question 'What is your religion?' followed by a check list of ten faith groups, preceded by 'none' and concluded by 'other (please specify)'. Those who checked the category 'Christian' were invited also to select between four denominational groups: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Free Church, and Other (please specify). Worship attendance was assessed by a five-point measure of frequency, from never to at least once a week. Personal prayer was assessed by a five-point measure of frequency,

from never to nearly every day. Religious experience was assessed on a four-point scale: no, perhaps but not really sure, probably but not certain, and yes definitely.

Analysis

In the following tables the agree strongly and the agree responses have been combined to form the category 'yes'; the disagree strongly and disagree responses have been combined to form the category 'no'.

Results

Personal religious profile

In response to the question on self-assigned religious affiliation, 249 students identified themselves as Christian (54%), and 35 as Muslim (8%), with small numbers of Hindus (7), Buddhists (3), Jews (2), Jains (2) and one Sikh. A further 11 students marked the category 'other' and 10 failed to answer the question. The remaining 142 marked the category 'none' (31%). Among the 249 Christian students, the two largest denominational categories were Roman Catholic (116) and Anglican (17).

The question on frequency of worship attendance demonstrated that one quarter of the students attended at least once a month (25%), another quarter never attended (26%) and the remaining half attended either at least six times a year (7%) or less frequently than that (42%).

The question on frequency of personal prayer demonstrated that two-fifths of the students never prayed (40%), while 16% prayed daily, 9% at least weekly, 5% at least monthly and 30% occasionally.

The question on religious experience demonstrated that 10% of the students were convinced that they had experienced something they would describe as a religious or spiritual experience, another 10% thought that they had probably had such an experience but were not certain; and a further 23% that they may have had such an experience but were not really

sure. This left 58% of the students who were clear that they had never experienced something of that nature.

Personal motivation

- insert table 1 about here -

The first issue explored by the survey concerned the students' motivation in pursuing religious studies at A level. The data presented in table 1 demonstrate that a major factor in motivating students to study religion at A level is their positive experience of studying the subject in school at an earlier stage. Over three-quarters of the students (78%) claimed that they were taking religious studies at A level because they had enjoyed their earlier experience of the subject. In other words, good religious education delivered lower down the school seems to provide core recruitment into the A-level religious studies class. It is probably this good experience of religious education lower down the school that helps to shape the response to the next two questions. Two-thirds of the students claimed that they were taking religious studies at A level to learn more about other religious faiths (68%) and to engage in debate with others (67%). The data also demonstrated that intrinsic motivation was much more important than extrinsic motivation. While two-thirds of the students were studying the subject because they wanted to learn about other religious faiths (68%), the proportion fell to one-third who were studying the subject because it was valued by universities (32%), and may consequently help them to gain a university place at the end of the course.

By way of comparison, just one in four students were motivated to take religious studies at A level to learn more about their own religious faith (27%), while even fewer (17%) were motivated to take religious studies at A level because they intended to study the subject at university.

A small minority of students found themselves studying religion at A level under the impression that it is an easy option (13%) or simply because it fitted into their timetable (18%).

Personal challenges

- insert table 2 about here -

The second issue explored by the survey concerned the personal challenges faced by the students in pursuing religious studies at A level. The data presented in table 2 demonstrate that over three-quarters of the students had felt challenged by studying religion at A level to think differently about religion. Thus 83% said that doing religious studies challenged them to think differently about religion in society; 82% said that doing religious studies challenged them to think differently about religious people; and 77% said that doing religious studies challenged them to think differently about the relationship between religion and science.

Although the levels of endorsement dropped when the focus changed from the more intellectual to the more personal, between two-fifths and half of the students recognised the challenges posed by studying religion at A level to their religious faith. Thus, 52% said that doing religious studies challenged them to re-think their ideas about God; and 40% said that doing religious studies challenged them to think differently about their religious faith.

Personal experience

- insert table 3 about here -

The third issue explored by the survey concerned the personal experience of the students in following their choice to pursue religious studies at A level. The data presented in table 3 demonstrate that between one-third and two-fifths of the students were personally highly engaged with the subject. Thus, for 42% of the students religious studies had been their first subject choice; for 37% of the students religious studies was their favourite subject; and for 33% of the students religious studies was their best subject at school.

Growth in understanding

- insert table 4 about here -

The fourth issue explored by the survey concerned the perceptions of the students regarding how studying religion at A level had impacted their understanding. The data presented in table 4 demonstrate a very high endorsement of the contribution made by studying religion at A level to the students' understanding of religion. Thus, at least four-fifths of the students endorsed the views that A level religious studies was helping them to understand the nature of religious beliefs (89%), the philosophical concepts behind religion (88%), how the lives of individuals are influenced by their religion (86%), the influence of religion in the world today (85%), and how to evaluate religious claims (83%).

For some of the other areas examined, endorsement dropped below the level of four-fifths, but only marginally so. Thus, nearly four-fifths of the students endorsed the views that A-level religious studies was helping them to understand the history of religions (79%), how religions relate to fundamental questions of life (78%), the references to religion in the news (77%), and the references to religion in their other subjects (73%).

Respecting religious diversity

- insert table 5 about here -

The fifth issue explored by the survey concerned the perceptions of the students regarding how studying religion at A level had impacted the way in which they reflected on religious diversity. The data presented in table 5 demonstrate that A-level religious studies may be making a helpful contribution to promoting community cohesion in the sense of enhancing respect for religious diversity. Thus, around four-fifths of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to respect other people's rights to hold beliefs different from their own (86%), to be more tolerant of other religions and worldviews (80%), and to be positive about living in a society of diverse religions (79%).

Personal development

- insert table 6 about here -

The sixth issue explored by the survey concerned the perceptions of the students regarding how studying religion at A level had impacted their personal development. The data presented in table 6 demonstrate that studying religion at A level is making a helpful contribution to the students' personal development. Thus, over two-thirds of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to make better arguments (82%), to be more critical of their own opinions (73%), to evaluate their personal values (71%), to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life (71%), and to develop the belief that life has some purpose (70%).

Somewhat lower levels of endorsement are attracted by the less academic and more personal objectives supplied by the survey. Thus, 62% of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to develop morally; 41% of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to develop their personal relationships better; and 39% of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to become happier people.

Spiritual and religious development

- insert table 7 about here -

The seventh issue explored by the survey concerned the perceptions of the students regarding how studying religion at A level had impacted their spiritual and religious development. The data presented in table 7 demonstrate that the students perceive A-level religious studies as having much lower impact on their spiritual and religious development than on their personal development. The largest impact on spiritual and religious development is reflected in the way that three-fifths of the students affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to express their own religious beliefs (59%).

The proportions fell to around two-fifths of the students who affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to engage in their own quest for a faith to live by (42%), to develop spiritually (40%), to develop religious beliefs (39%), or to become more formed in their own religion (39%). The proportion fell further in respect of those who affirmed that A-level religious studies was helping them to develop a relationship with God (33%), but further still in respect of those who affirmed that A level religious studies was helping them to become more agnostic (26%), more atheist (20%), or more secular (16%).

Connecting with personal religious faith

- insert table 8 about here -

The eighth issue explored by the survey concerned the perceptions of the students regarding the connection between studying religion at A level and their personal religious faith. The data presented in table 8 demonstrate that for the majority of students, studying religion at A level does not connect directly with their personal religious faith. Indeed over one-third of the students are clear that they are taking religious studies even though they do not have a religious faith (36%). A similar proportion (34%), on the other hand, are finding religious studies personally helpful in shaping their religious faith.

Only a small proportion of students (7%) have found that doing religious studies has undermined their religious faith. Three times that number (20%) have found that doing religious studies has affirmed their religious faith.

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to address nine research questions. The original data gathered from 462 students who were coming to the end of the first year of studying religion at A level offered the following responses to these nine research questions.

The first research question concerned the personal and religious profile of the 462 students who participated in the survey. The key finding is that A-level religious studies

attracts both students who are closely aligned with religious identity and religious practice, and students who have little current contact with a religious tradition. Thus, there are significant numbers of students studying religion at A level who identify with a faith tradition, and who engage with frequent public practice (worship attendance) and frequent personal practice (prayer). There are also significant numbers of students who say that they belong to no religious group, never pray and never engage with public worship attendance. It is important for A-level religious studies provision to acknowledge the presence in the classroom of students of religious faith alongside students who do not have religious faith.

The second research question concerned identifying the personal motivation of these students to study religion at A level. The key finding is that the most important motivational factor is the students' experience of the subject (religious studies or religious education) lower down in the school. Schools that wish to build strong religious studies A-level groups need to invest well in the subject during the earlier formative years from year seven to year eleven. This may involve giving proper attention to the curriculum and to the staffing.

The third research question concerned identifying the ways in which the students perceived the educational challenges offered by studying religion at A level. The key finding is that A-level religious studies offers effective challenges for students to reconceptualise their understanding of the social, personal and intellectual dimensions of religion. In this sense, A-level religious studies is offering a crucial foundation for the intelligent and informed evaluation of the public and social significance of religion.

The fourth research question concerned identifying the levels of personal engagement of the students with studying religion at A level. The key finding is that over one-third of the students rated A-level religious studies as their first subject choice, as their best subject or as their favourite subject. These statistics suggest that A-level religious studies classes contain a

good proportion of intrinsically motivated students who could (and should) become ambassadors for the subject within the school.

The fifth research question concerned identifying the levels of perceived growth in understanding encouraged by studying religion at A level. The key finding is that the majority of students affirm that studying religion at A level genuinely promotes their understanding of many aspects of religion and helps them to evaluate religious claims. Such enhanced understanding should equip these students to make valuable and important contributions within a wide range of professions and enhance their employability in many sectors. In turn such information should enhance the professional self-confidence of the subject itself and its position within the school curriculum.

The sixth research question concerned identifying the levels of perceived growth in respect for religious diversity arising from studying religion at A level. The key finding is that the majority of students affirm that studying religion at A level genuinely promotes their respect for and positive attitude toward religious diversity. Such enhanced informed awareness of religious differences offer an important contribution to fostering community cohesion and to equipping citizens for managing the challenges and opportunities offered by religiously diverse societies. It may be increasingly important that this public benefit deriving from A-level religious studies should be better publicised.

The seventh research question concerned identifying the levels of perceived impact of studying religion at A level on personal development. The key finding is that the majority of students affirm that studying religion at A level has helped them to make better arguments, and to evaluate their personal values. The contribution of the sixth-form curriculum to personal development may be attractive to post-sixteen students grappling with adolescent issues of identity, development and self-awareness. It may be wise to emphasise this contribution made by the religious studies department.

The eighth research question concerned identifying the levels of perceived impact of studying religion at A level on spiritual and religious development. The key finding is that this is not overall a high priority for the students. The majority have not joined the A-level religious studies class either to critique or to deepen their religious beliefs. For a significant minority, however, between one-third and two-fifths, A-level religious studies has helped them to develop their relationship with God, to become more formed in their own religion, and to develop spiritually. The A-level religious studies classroom needs to be fully aware of and capable of relating to the expectations and needs of this significant minority of students.

The ninth research question concerned identifying how studying religion at A level connects with personal religious faith. The key finding is that a very small minority of students (7%) have found that studying religion at A level undermines their personal religious faith while three times that number feel that it has affirmed their religious faith. There should be little reason for churches to warn their young members against studying religion at A level, but much stronger reasons for churches to encourage their young members to allow their faith to be both challenged and affirmed by this educational process.

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Table 1

Personal motivation

	Yes %	? %	No %
I am studying religious studies:			
to learn more about more my own religious faith	27	15	58
to learn more about other religious faiths	68	15	17
to engage in debate with others	67	17	16
because I enjoyed my earlier experiences of the subject	78	11	11
because it is valued by universities	32	34	35
because it is an easy option	13	8	79
because it fitted into my timetable	8	10	83
because I intend to study it at university	17	27	56

Table 2

Personal challenges

	Yes %	? %	No %
Doing religious studies challenges me:			
to think differently about religious people	82	9	9
to think differently about religion in society	83	10	6
to think differently about the relationships between religion and science	77	14	9
to re-think my ideas about God	52	19	29
to think differently about my religious faith	40	20	40

Table 3

Personal experience

	Yes %	? %	No %
Religious studies was my first subject choice	42	15	44
Religious studies is my best subject	33	37	30
Religious studies is my favourite subject	37	29	34

Table 4

Growth in understanding

	Yes %	? %	No %
A level religious studies is helping me to understand:			
the philosophical concepts behind religion	88	9	3
the nature of religious beliefs	89	8	3
the history of religions	79	15	7
how the lives of individuals are influenced by their religion	86	9	4
the influence of religion in the world today	85	10	5
the references to religion in the news	77	14	10
the references to religion in my other subjects	73	17	10
how religions relate to fundamental questions of life	78	16	6
how to evaluate religious claims	83	12	6

Table 5

Respecting religious diversity

	Yes %	? %	No %
A level religious studies is helping me to:			
be positive about living in a society of diverse religions	79	15	7
be more tolerant of other religions and worldviews	80	13	7
respect other people's rights to hold beliefs different from my own	86	10	4

Table 6

Personal development

	Yes %	? %	No %
A level religious studies is helping me to:			
evaluate my personal values	71	19	10
be more critical of my own opinions	73	18	9
make better arguments	82	12	6
reflect on the meaning and purpose of life	71	18	11
develop the belief that life has some purpose	70	19	11
become a happier person	39	36	25
develop my personal relationships better	41	34	25
develop morally	62	23	16

Table 7

Spiritual and religious development

	Yes %	? %	No %
A level religious studies is helping me to:			
develop spiritually	40	29	31
engage in my own quest for a faith to live by	42	29	29
develop a relationship with God	33	26	40
develop religious beliefs	39	25	37
express my own religious beliefs	59	22	19
become more formed in my own religion	39	26	35
become more agnostic	26	30	44
become more atheist	20	27	53
become more secular	16	39	45

Table 8

Connecting with personal religious faith

	Yes %	? %	No %
Doing religious studies affirms my religious faith	20	32	48
Doing religious studies undermines my religious faith	7	28	66
I find religious studies personally helpful in shaping my religious faith	34	25	40
I am studying religious studies even though I don't have a religious faith	36	9	55