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0521847370 - Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century

Edited by David F. Ford, Ben Quash and Janet Martin Soskice

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FIELDS OF FAITH

How will the study of theology and the religions in higher education be shaped in the coming century? This book offers several different perspectives on this field of study with suggestions for a future in which theology and religious studies are pursued together. There are examples of the interplay of theology and religious studies with reference to a range of topics: God, love, scripture, worship, argument, reconciliation, friendship and justice. The contributors practise different disciplines within the field, often in combination, covering theology, philosophy, history, phenomenology, literary studies, hermeneutics, politics, ethics and law. Their specialisms embrace Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Indian religions, with particular focus on the field in Europe, the US and South Africa. Recognising the significance of the religions and of higher education, the book explores what best practice can be adopted to fulfil responsibilities towards academic disciplines, the religions and the societies of which they are part.

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FIELDS OF FAITH

*Theology and Religious Studies for the
Twenty-First Century*

EDITED BY

DAVID F. FORD, BEN QUASH AND
JANET MARTIN SOSKICE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United KingdomCAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Garamond 11/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*Fields of faith : theology and religious studies for the twenty-first century / edited by David F. Ford,
Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 84737 0

I. Religion—Study and teaching (Higher) 2. Theology—Study and teaching (Higher)

I. Ford, David, 1948- II. Quash, Ben. III. Soskice, Janet Martin.

BL41.F53 2004

2007.711 — dc22 2004054643

ISBN 0 521 84737 0 hardback

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*This book is dedicated to
Nicholas Lash
Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity
in the University of Cambridge
1978–1999
in honour of his immense contribution
to philosophical theology,
to the whole field of theology and religious studies,
to the University of Cambridge and in particular its Faculty of Divinity,
to the Catholic Church, other Churches, and other religious traditions,
with great gratitude from
his many friends and colleagues,
among them the contributors to this book.*

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Catholic and Protestant thought, philosophical theology, ethics, and the use and interpretation of the Bible both within and across religious traditions.

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ROWAN WILLIAMS, Archbishop of Canterbury, has written a number of books on the history of theology and spirituality and published collections of articles and sermons. He has been involved in various commissions on theology and theological education, was a member of the Church Schools Review Group led by Lord Dearing, and chaired the group that produced the report *Wales: a Moral Society?* His recent publications include: *On Christian Theology* (2000), *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and Its Aftermath* (2002) and *Anglican Identities* (2004).

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Introduction

David F. Ford

How is the study of theology and religions in higher education to be shaped in the coming century? There is obviously no single answer to that question. Empirically, there will of course continue to be great diversity in the ways the field is formed, some of which do not accept that theology and the study of religions should be institutionally connected. This diversity is rooted in different histories, interests, commitments and visions, but there is little enough literature that engages with these in order to shape a fruitful future for the field. The lack is especially serious in relation to those settings where theology and religious studies go together, the number and vitality of which increased in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The contributors to this book examine that togetherness from various angles with a view to the future. They do this in Part I by giving accounts of the field and making suggestions about its future; and then in Part II by ‘performing’ the interplay of theology and religious studies. In this part the claim that the two should come together is supported by showing in practice that the treatment of significant topics benefits from their interplay. In conclusion, there is a response to the book based on some intensive discussion between an editor, a contributor, and a participant in the consultation that was part of the book’s genesis.

The aim of the book is therefore to conceptualise, exemplify and reflect upon the study of theology and religions, with a special concern for the interaction of two dimensions of the field that are often separated institutionally. It is conceived not only in relation to those settings where theology and religious studies already come together, but also to those where there is a more single-minded focus on either ‘theology’ or ‘religious studies’. As decisions are taken about course topics, contents and methods, and about institutional policies in teaching, research and staffing, it can be of considerable importance whether a basic commitment to theology is open to contributions from religious studies or a religious studies tradition is hospitable to theology. For those academics who are working in the field,

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or are trying to orient themselves early in their careers, the horizon within which they see their specialism can help shape their research, teaching and career decisions.

Yet the shaping of this field has implications far beyond the academy. The contributions in Part II especially show this. Under the heading of 'Understanding Faith' a series of basic questions is explored. What if modern notions of 'religion' and 'mysticism' are shown to be untenable by a critique that draws simultaneously on phenomenology of religion and theology? (Williams) If love is a widespread human phenomenon worthy of academic and theological attention, how can Theology and Religious Studies do justice to it in the context of a secular university? (Lipner) Lipner's questions about religious studies, descriptive theology and performative theology are strikingly addressed by Ochs in his discussion of Jewish study of scripture and Talmud after the Shoah, of the University of Virginia's model of 'religious studies as comparative traditions', and of 'theological studies as scriptural reasoning' in engagement with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures. Ochs even offers four basic rules for the peaceful co-existence of theology and religious studies. The fourth contribution in this part shifts the focus to worship: how would hundreds of millions of Christians be worshipping today if Jungmann's tendentious account of liturgical development had been less influential? (Duffy)

'The Practice of Justice and Love' raises a further four radical questions. What if academic argument were to serve the task of learning a wisdom for living? (Adams) What can a divided, multi-racial and multi-faith society such as South Africa's learn from academic contributions that help religious communities not only to understand each other but also to engage in critical and constructive research, teaching and dialogues with a view to a better common future? (de Gruchy) What if a Jewish conception of friendship with God and other people were to be practised more widely in the academy and elsewhere? (Soskice) Her analysis of Western Christian traditions on friendship (including a *jeu d'esprit* on gender) is Christian theology done in the formative presence of another faith and resonates with Ochs on comparative traditions and scriptural reasoning. Finally, how is a minority religious community to relate its understanding and practice concerning justice to the public institutions and debates of a liberal Western democracy? (Malik) The mutual inextricability of elements that are often ascribed either to theology or to religious studies is especially demonstrated in such practical implications for worldviews, politics, the life of religious communities and personal relationships.

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Through these chapters elements that are often ascribed in binary fashion either to theology or to religious studies are found to be mutually inextricable. The artificiality and even destructiveness of separating the two is especially clear when the large, deep questions are tackled and there is a need to draw on all relevant resources to do justice to them. Philosophy, history, phenomenology, literary studies, hermeneutics, semiotics, liturgiology, politics, ethics and law are all in play. They are employed very differently, but they are not self-enclosed: they are in dialogue with each other and also allow for theological questioning and answering.

This complex set of interactions requires the sort of theology, history, philosophy, 'thick description' and fresh conceptualising that Part I brings to bear on the field. The overall intention is not to propose a general framework for the field that might be universally applied. It is rather an attempt to articulate and debate the wisdom that has been learnt in particular traditions, institutions and conversations under specific historical influences and constraints. This family of understandings, together with critical questions about it, is shared in the hope that others in their settings might have something to learn from it, and that the interplay of theology and religious studies might be more widely accepted as deserving to be a major contributor to the future of the field.

The contributors' particularity and the refusal to offer generalised prescriptions for all contexts is reflected in the specificity of the book's origins. Britain is the country in which the institutional association of Theology and Religious Studies in universities is most common. Most of the authors are based in British universities (though some have origins in Ireland, North America and South Asia), but there are also contributions from universities in the US and South Africa, in both of which there have been developments that combine Theology with Religious Studies. In addition, part of the process that generated the book was a four-day consultation on 'The Future of the Study of Theology and Religions'. There, initial drafts of some of the chapters were intensively discussed by a group of sixty invited academics, who greatly expanded the religious, disciplinary, institutional and geographical range of the input.

In British universities, for reasons largely to do with history and the religious makeup of the country, there is more study of Christianity than of other religions. This local characteristic is also reflected in the book. Eight authors of chapters specialise in areas related to Christianity, two in Indian religions, one in Judaism and one in Islam.

Within Britain, the largest single group of contributors (the editors and three others) is from the University of Cambridge. The consultation

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mentioned above was preceded by two years of preparatory discussion during which senior seminars of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity (covering the religious traditions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and also the study of religions by the human sciences) engaged with questions relating to the future of their field. Many of the sessions drew together seminars specialising in different areas in order to do justice to the interdisciplinary nature of the field. In the last quarter of the twentieth century the Cambridge Faculty had gone beyond its traditional study of Christianity to include other religious traditions in its curriculum and call its main degree course 'Theology and Religious Studies'. The seminar discussions that contributed to this book took place as the pace and range of the Faculty's development accelerated, embracing a Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, new posts, a revised curriculum, the construction of a Faculty building, and new forms of collaboration with the expanding Cambridge Theological Federation (Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, United Reformed, and a Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations). This meant that ideas about the nature of the field and its future were being applied and tested in practical ways that involved not only the University and its disciplines but also many religious communities and a range of other constituencies that were concerned with research projects or with funding.

Finally, and most important of all in the genesis of this book, there has been one particular person, Nicholas Lash, the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge from 1978 till 1999. While playing a leading role in national and international theology and philosophy of religion he was also pivotal over many years in the development of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity described above. He succeeded in his chair one of the towering figures of British philosophical theology, Donald MacKinnon. Like MacKinnon, Lash succeeded both in sustaining a lively engagement with the tradition of analytical philosophy and at the same time in cultivating a rich – and often sharply critical – theological, literary and political sensibility. Lash also developed his own distinctive theological thrust, indebted to Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Lonergan, Rahner, and perhaps above all to John Henry Newman. He helped to make England a leading centre for lay Roman Catholic theology, and himself played a vital role as its most distinguished academic and arbiter of intellectual quality. His most recent major work, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*,¹ could be read as offering the historical, philosophical and theological rationale for

¹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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the claim that in university settings both Theology and Religious Studies flourish best together. In place of the Enlightenment's 'neutral ground' it cultivates the 'mutual ground' of particular traditions in deep engagement with each other.

It was this book that inspired the thought that the appropriate way to mark Nicholas Lash's retirement would be to do some serious collaborative thinking about the field of theology and religious studies. Those of us in the Faculty who came together to plan the process of seminars, consultation and the present book did not, however, want to deprive ourselves of Nicholas's contribution to our discussions. So we shared our intentions with him and have had the benefit of his participation, especially in the consultation. We dedicate the result to him, with great gratitude for a lifetime's achievement, and in the hope that the fruits of his retirement will contribute yet further to the field.

In his Teape Lectures, delivered in India in 1994, he suggested that 'we should understand the great traditions as schools whose pedagogy serves to wean us from idolatry'.² He drew deeply on the Abrahamic and Indian religious traditions to evoke the purification of desire and the disciplines of adoration, affirmation and negation that are part of that schooling. In the last lecture he daringly explored affinities between Brahman and the Trinity under the heading of 'reality, wisdom and delight', and the culminating section of that lecture was entitled 'In Quest of Wisdom'. In it he recalled an earlier remark about the crisis of our time being characterised by the extent to which our ingenuity has outstripped our wisdom. It is a diagnosis that may seem uncomfortably appropriate to the field of theology and religious studies, with its ramifying ingenuity in methods, critiques, constructions and deconstructions. He continues: 'It would therefore seem that those of us who live, work, and think within the ancient schools of wisdom that we call "religions" bear heavy burdens of responsibility to the wider culture.'³ Perhaps the most fundamental challenge for those of us in the field of theology and religious studies is to let our passion for wisdom outstrip our ingenuity in the interests of fulfilling responsibilities towards our world.

² *Ibid.*, p. 60. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.