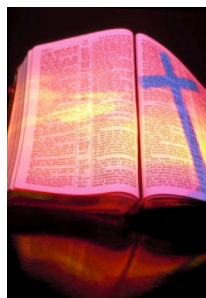


Gospel & Law

Michaelmas Edition – Addendum re prizes

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ECCLESIASTICAL LAW SOCIETY PRIZES

The Ecclesiastical Law Society encourages the academic study of Ecclesiastical Law by awarding Eric Kemp prizes, named in honour of the Society's first President, to the student with the best mark in the subject, at a number of Law Schools which teach LLB options that include 'a significant element of Ecclesiastical Law'. In practice these courses tend to attract many students because of their human rights content. The Course Director at Bangor, Alison Mawinney, gave a paper on students' responses to the subject of Law and Religion, at the annual conference in Cardiff of the Law and Religion Scholars Network, in May 2014. The following is a summary of Alison's paper.

Law and Religion: A Student Perspective. An increasing number of universities in the UK offer their students the opportunity to choose a Law and Religion module at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The complex, extensive and fast-moving nature of this area of study presents challenges for lecturers in designing and teaching such modules. This note reports the results of a survey carried out with of a small group of undergraduate students at Bangor to gain an insight into whether and how students consider that studying a Law and Religion module differs from studying other law modules on their programme.

At Bangor University 'Law and Religion' is offered as an elective module to second and third year students and runs for 20 weeks of teaching. Assessment consists of an essay and three hour examination.

The survey was conducted when 90% of the course had been completed with a group of 22 students of whom 14 (64%) responded to four questions:

Question 1: In what ways do you think that studying a law and religion module differs from other law modules? A clear theme emerged; in contrast to other law modules, in Law and Religion there was very often no clear correct 'answer' to the issues being examined:

'it may be said that in some other modules there is a strict right or wrong opinion. In law and religion this is often not the case. Requires more in depth understanding', And, *'It requires a different approach in the way of thinking as it is not as set in stone as in other modules'.*

For some this was a positive aspect that contributed to the enjoyment of studying the module:

'[I]t's not as black and white, there are lots of grey areas but that's why it's more interesting than other modules'. And *'compared to some modules it is thought-provoking but that is very positive'*

Question 2: Compared to other modules you've taken, do you think the studying of law and religion is (a) easier (b) harder or (c) about the same? Two students felt it was an easier module to study, six thought it was harder and six felt that it was no different to their other modules. Of those that replied 'easier', the common view seemed to be that any additional complexity involved in studying law and religion issues actually made the module more interesting and increased the desire to

learn: *'I find that it is more theoretical.... and so is more engaging. This makes it easier to learn as I actually want to explore more'* And *'The module is enjoyable and this makes studying easier'*

Those that considered the Law and Religion module to be more demanding than other modules highlighted the need to be aware of a wide range of factors and issues that it raises:

'[T]his module is slightly harder than others because more factors must be taken into consideration'
And: *'It requires the student to be able to take different stances on issues, not so in other modules'*

Question 3: Do you think it's a module suited to an UG programme of study or better suited to a PG programme of study? 13 students responded that it was suitable for undergraduate study and just one student thought it might be better studied at Masters level. Given the nature of many of the topics discussed in Law and Religion modules such a large number in favour of the undergraduate option is perhaps surprising. However, students reported that they were keen to encounter the subject matter of the module and its associated approach to treating controversial societal issues. Furthermore, it would seem to provide a welcome contrast to other law modules: *'[U]ndergraduate – better to have the knowledge early on'* And *'Undergraduate because it can be seen as a thinking test for the undergraduate student, to allow them to think more, not like some type of law that is just black and white'*

Question 4: What do you think is most challenging about studying law and religion? Responses here fell into three categories. First, students felt that the need to learn a substantial amount of human rights law in the early stages of the course was rather daunting where they had not already been fully introduced to that subject. Knowledge of international and regional human rights frameworks – provisions and mechanisms – is essential for the examination of many of the freedom of religion or belief issues dealt with later in the course.

'[T]he first part of the course (semester 1) is difficult with the different bodies, cases etc and new information' And *'Getting to know national, European and international case law [is tough]'*

The second area of challenge reported by students is the need to keep up to date and be familiar with contemporary issues and case law in the area of law and religion. Despite being provided with links to relevant websites, blogs and databases, students seemed to be unfamiliar with the detail of court judgments and unaware of relevant recent developments. However, when they did encounter and discuss these happenings in class, interest tended to be strong: *'getting to learn about controversial topics and issues is interesting...and makes it a module to look forward to studying'*.

The final area of challenge for students relates back to the lack of a definitive answer to many of the topics examined in the module - *'interpreting the legal framework as there are multiple ways to reach a conclusion'* And *'there are a large number of ideas that need to be considered and it can be opinion based which can make it difficult to understand what the current court view on the issue is'*

The challenges highlighted by the students are of course not all unique to Law and Religion. Many a Public Law lecturer would wish that their students were more aware of current developments, and the task of getting students to read cases remains a perennial one for all law lecturers. However, a survey of this nature is helpful in reminding lecturers that a Law and Religion module may often present students with a hitherto novel, albeit stimulating, way of applying law in an attempt to resolve important and complex societal concerns.

With thanks to David Harte for his liaison with universities on this aspect of ELS work.