

White-Hot: A Conversation with Three Women Professors

Simone Kotva and Ruth Jackson

The coming academic year sees the retirement of three distinguished professors in our faculty: Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity; Judith Lieu, Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity, and Janet Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology. All three are leaders in their respective fields, and over their careers they have witnessed great changes in the practice and ethos of theology at the University. We spoke with them to find out what motivated them to study theology and their thoughts on the future of the discipline.

Sarah and Janet both work in the area of philosophical theology or philosophy of religion, while Judith specialises in the study of the New Testament; but all three came to theology serendipitously. Judith found herself gravitating toward theology after a last-minute switch from Mathematics and Science to Classics and Religious Studies at GCSE level, and only decided to pursue research after first testing an alternative career as a school teacher. Janet stumbled into theology from cultural anthropology, thinking she would use the discipline as preparation for a doctorate on metaphor and religious language amongst rural migrants in northern Brazil: 'I hate to admit it, but it didn't occur to me then that women could be theologians, or really that theology could be taught in universities. I realised that I could follow my interests within philosophy of religion. That's where I started out. I would not have presumed

to be a theologian as I knew so little'. Sarah, though she knew she wanted to become a theologian already at the age of twelve, likewise did not think that women could become theologians—at least, not the kind of theologians that were teaching in the academy at the time: 'I did a bit of searching around but couldn't see any evidence of women theologians in the academy'.

When our professors were starting out, not only were women theologians difficult to find in university departments, they were also difficult to find on reading lists. Sarah explains: 'The two women I did come across, read, and admired in the subsequent year or two (Evelyn Underhill and Simone Weil) were obviously only clinging to the edges of the university and both decidedly *strange* - both in their ways "white-hot neo-platonists". But that made them all the more intriguing'. Today, however, Weil is often found on course syllabuses: as theology has broadened to let women into the academy, it has also broadened the boundaries of its field. This expansion of what might be considered 'theology' is perhaps the most significant change that Janet and Judith witnessed over the course of their careers. 'If we go back to the times at which I was a student, not at this university', reflects Janet, 'I'd say that theology was presented, even by some of the professors, as a busted flush, dependent on outdated metaphysics. The senior professors

of my student days were still scarred by logical positivism and ferocious attacks on theology as an academic discipline. The first welcome signs of change (and these I sensed from some quarters, like the English faculty, from the first year I was in Cambridge) was a recognition that theological texts were intrinsically participatory and novel in genre, not trying to systematise in the way of the natural sciences but still exploring valid ways of knowing and being. Since then I've seen the interest in theology grow year by year, greatly enhanced by recovery of interest in Hellenistic Judaism, late antiquity and such things as feminist work and medieval history'. Judith reflects on similar changes in Biblical studies: 'In Biblical studies, historical critical approaches were the norm when I started; now there are the competing claims of literary (narrative, reader-response, reception), social scientific, and ideological (feminist, gender, post-colonial) readings. Parallel with that has been a move from a fairly strict emphasis on the canonical boundaries to interest in non-canonical texts and recognising the continuities from first to second century, and between the "Christian" and "Jewish" world-views. I am very much at home in the more fluid and open-ended explorations that follow'. With this broadening of the discipline, questions of recognising women and women theologians have become less of a struggle. Janet, enumerating the wide array of subjects which are now considered part of



theology, finds herself exclaiming: ‘The fact that I haven’t mentioned women and religion just shows how fully that is taken for granted and integrated across the board—a big change from when I started!’

Despite these advances Judith recognises the fight facing the discipline. ‘We face a lot of challenges, especially with the increasing emphasis on accountability and on the need to appear relevant, in what can feel like very market-driven terms’. Sarah and Janet, however, also point out that with religion being the hot topic of political and international affairs, its study is more popular and essential than ever before. As Sarah puts it, ‘fashions come and go—some parents are probably telling their offspring right now that a degree in Theology, Religion and Philosophy of Religion won’t deliver a well-paid job; but they are quite wrong about that, as the University employment statistics will readily show. This subject equips you for just about anything: it requires a dazzling range of intellectual and personal skills’. Janet agrees: ‘theology graduates go into all the professions any arts candidate might enter and are, I believe, enriched by this diverse degree’.

In Janet’s opinion, what allows theology to assert its relevance to contemporary society is its connection with ‘living and living faiths’. For Sarah it is this connection which brings God into the picture: ‘One hopes that the major influence [on the discipline] is, and

will remain, God in Godself. But that requires a certain practice of attention, vulnerability and hope; and it’s not our business in the University, as such, to proselytize. Still, whenever theology reduces itself to endless talk about what other people have said about God (“theologology” rather than theology) then it has begun to lose its meaning and power. Hence the paradox: theology (and philosophy of religion in concert with it) is at its best when it is radically open to other disciplines and their critiques, but even more radically open to that which it attempts to speak of as Reality’. Judith reflects a similar awareness when she concludes that ‘intellectually, theology has always been responsive to the changing conceptual and methodological frameworks shaping or emerging from other disciplines of enquiry—whether philosophical, scientific, historical, literary etc. I do not think that is a bad thing, so long as we sustain a critical self-awareness, and a respect for the scholarly enquiries and insights of our past’.

We want to thank Sarah, Judith and Janet for their time in the Faculty of Divinity. They have been inspiring examples to many, and will be greatly missed by students and colleagues.

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