

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION AT KEBLE

Briefing for Undergraduates

Welcome and introductions

First of all, a very warm welcome to Keble.

Theology at Keble has a distinguished history, with notable former tutors including the philosopher and spiritual writer Austin Farrer, and the New Testament scholar Dennis Nineham. At the present time, the college is strengthening its commitment to Theology and Religion, increasing the cohort of undergraduate students and expanding tutorial provision (with a particular emphasis on biblical studies and church history). It has a reputation as a friendly and flourishing community, academically rigorous but also sociable and supportive.

I hope you'll find Keble to be a hospitable environment, and that all these introductory notes will give you an initial orientation which will help you make sense of things when you arrive.

A brief introduction to the team:

Prof. David Downs is Clarendon-Laing Associate Professor of New Testament Studies, Tutorial Fellow and co-Director of Studies in Theology and Religion at Keble.

Prof. Kirsten Macfarlane is Associate Professor of Early Modern Christianities, Tutorial Fellow and co-Director of Studies in Theology and Religion at Keble.

Although Profs. Downs and Macfarlane will be coordinating your teaching and working with you most closely during your degree, you'll also meet other theologians in college, among them **Prof. Markus Bockmuehl**, who is Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, and **Revd. Nevsky Everett**, Chaplain and Fellow.

We are all very much looking forward to meeting you in person. We were impressed by your applications, and want you to do well and have a good experience at Oxford.

Please do "hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" this document, as it contains information that will be useful to you throughout your degree: it doesn't have the canonical status of the Faculty of Theology and Religion's Handbooks, the College Handbook or the Examination Decrees and Regulations, but it is intended to be a practical one-stop reference guide with information and advice not available together in one place elsewhere.

Contents

On arrival	p. 3
Tutorials	p. 3
Essay-writing	p. 4
Feedback and reporting	p. 5
Lectures	p. 5
College examinations	p. 6
Course of Study	p. 6
Discipline	p. 7
Keble Theology: the community	p. 8
Final words	p. 8

On arrival

You will receive large volumes of written information and a complex timetable when you arrive in Oxford. You should check your emails regularly (and continue this habit throughout your 3 years) and put in place some sort of effective filing and diary system right from the outset. Make sure you give priority to the key induction events and don't be afraid to alert us to any clashes: we try our best to avoid conflicts, but sometimes Freshers' Week can be difficult to manage from an administrative point of view as well as for the students! Among other notifications, quite early on you will receive invitations to events like drinks receptions, meals etc. Please do RSVP promptly and gratefully to these, and make the most of such opportunities.

You will have a meeting in Freshers' Week with Profs. Downs and Macfarlane (and, for the Philosophy/Theology students, your director of studies in Philosophy), to talk through expectations and address any questions. You will also be given your first essay question and reading list, and may also be invited to meet with your tutor in advance of your first tutorial. Less formal meetings will be arranged with subject representatives and college "parents" from your subject: these are students in the year above who are there to guide you through your early weeks at Oxford and to give you the benefit of their experience (and who take their responsibilities more or less seriously!).

You may observe some posturing going on when you arrive (undercurrents of competition are never far below the surface at Oxford), with a certain amount of point-scoring over A-Levels, work experience, etc. If you start to feel a bit overwhelmed or out of your depth, please don't worry: this is quite normal, and many, many people experience this feeling who go on to thrive at Oxford and eventually do much better than some of those with all the early appearances of confidence. You are not expected to be on top of everything and to perform effortlessly in your early weeks; there is naturally a period of adjustment and you should not be at all afraid to ask for support if you need it – no one will think less of you for being human.

Tutorials

These can take various forms. Sometimes you will have a one-to-one meeting with your tutor, sometimes you will be taught in a pair or a group of three. Some tutors ask for essays to be submitted in advance (usually by email attachment); others ask that students read their essays aloud. It can be a combination of these two approaches. Both disciplines enable you to develop useful skills: it is excellent preparation for all kinds of working environments to learn to present your work in an engaging way; you will also learn to meet deadlines under a certain amount of pressure.

Tutorials might take place at Keble, but they may also be held anywhere else in the University, from Champion Hall to the Oriental Institute. Please read your tutor's instructions carefully and make sure that you produce work at the time and in the manner that they expect. Tutors have different requirements in terms of essay length: some for Philosophy can be in the region of 1500 words, but most are usually around 2000-2500 words, give or take 10%.

As well as continually being mindful of the terms of your college membership (see section on "Discipline" below), it is worth being aware that tutors' reports can ultimately contribute to references for employment, and it is important to be respectful and cooperative. The demands made of you in terms of the tutorial routine should not be unreasonable (and every effort is made to ensure that your work is spread evenly), but if you are struggling with the workload or any aspect of your life in Oxford, there is plenty of support available: from your Director of Studies, but also from the welfare team in college (see contact details here: <https://www.keble.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Welfare-and-Personal-Support-Guide.pdf>), and before things start to get overwhelming, please do seek it out.

Essay-writing

Feedback from tutors will help you to develop your writing skills, but do consider the following principles and guidelines as you start to prepare essays:

- **First, identify the debate.** Almost always, the essay topic you are given addresses a controversial or widely-discussed problem in secondary literature. Your reading should give you important context and useful background information, but also direct you to different angles on the question at issue.
- **Read strategically.** This is linked to the first point. Notice the difference between scholars in terms of their approaches and their conclusions. Read scholarly book reviews (you can find these using one of the online journal databases on SOLO: JSTOR, or Oxford Journals, or SAGE, etc – Google Scholar is also not a bad way to access relevant articles quickly) to identify what a book is about and how it relates to other works, before plunging into it. Use indexes wisely, follow leads in footnotes. A good rule of thumb is to consult 5 or 6 titles for each essay; you may not have time to read each of these in full, but make sure you have read most of them and that you have a good idea of what each is about. Writing summaries of articles or chapters in books after reading them in full is a better way to get an orientation than to take extensive notes on a few pages, and run out of steam because you can't see the wood for the trees.
- **Consult relevant primary sources.** This is more applicable in some subjects than others, but for biblical and historical papers, cannot be emphasised enough. It is generally true that nothing will impress your tutors more, or reinforce your understanding more surely, than direct engagement with primary texts. Conversely, early essays are often weakened by an over-reliance on secondary literature. You may feel out of your depth when first consulting materials far outside your period and context, so ensure that you have some general background knowledge first. But don't be timid: you will often find you understand more than you expect. Consider who the author is, and who they are writing for; ask why certain issues are so important to them, what is at stake in their intervention?
- **Plan your essay.** Students work in different ways; some work better with an extensive plan, others don't know quite what they're going to say until they start writing. Don't imagine that one approach is superior; you just have to find a rhythm and system that works for you. But it's never a bad idea to have an outline structure in mind before you start writing, even if you don't stick to it rigidly. How do you structure an essay? Depending on the subject matter, you might organise it around illustrative case studies, or themes, or scholarly positions; chronology might also provide a good framework, as long as you ensure that analysis rather than narrative is central to your writing.
- **Ensure that your essay builds an argument.** Many early undergraduate essays are fatally weakened by simply offering an overview of a topic, without arriving at a conclusion. Alternatively, you might give two sides of a debate and then offer a rather weak compromise: accommodation between two perspectives, fairly represented, is not always a soft analytical strategy but it's obvious when you're just fudging the issue. It is natural to be conservative at first and inhibited by the limits of your own knowledge, and of course you shouldn't set out to argue an absurd position for the sake of being "original." But try to weigh the arguments in the secondary literature critically, noticing flaws in reasoning, or weaknesses in their use of evidence; at the same time don't be dismissive. The most persuasive and devastating critiques are those which assess alternative viewpoints fairly and on their own terms.

On the other hand, be prepared to explore and be adventurous; tutorial essays are a good opportunity to try out your own ideas, and if they don't work at a first outing you will get useful critical feedback from tutors, to help you refine a position before exams. Ensure that you engage carefully with secondary literature, but do not hide behind it. An effective essay

is one which places original argument in the foreground; quotations from secondary literature may support but should not replace it.

Feedback and reporting

ORAL: You will receive feedback on your essays orally as part of the tutorial: this should not be a confrontational encounter or one in which you are aggressively shut down, but may involve the tutor taking an adversarial position (whether or not they hold it themselves) in order to test your argument. The ideal tutorial is one in which an argument's strengths and weaknesses are constructively assessed, alternative lines of enquiry are explored, and you are taken further in your understanding and can refine your position.

WRITTEN: You should also receive written feedback on your essays; some tutors offer more extensive comments and corrections than others. There are also different habits with respect to marking: some will give you a numerical grade (as a basic scheme, 50-59 is 2:2 level; 60-69 is 2:1; 70 or above is first-class), others choose not to award a grade but to give feedback through their comments. There are good pedagogical reasons for doing this: it can be misleading at an early stage in your degree to be given exam-style grades, and students can take this as a stable verdict on their work without fully taking into account advice for development, or encouraging feedback.

REPORTS: Finally, you will receive an overall report on your term's work on an online reporting system. You should receive this by the end of week 8 of the relevant term or shortly thereafter.

As well as reading the online reports, there will be an opportunity to discuss your progress at Warden's Collections, a meeting with your Director(s) of Studies, the Warden and Senior Tutor, which take place on a yearly basis. You shouldn't be concerned about these if everything is going fine: they are brief, 5-minute encounters designed principally to ensure that everything is on track.

You will have the opportunity to give feedback on your tutorials in the form of an anonymous survey circulated by the Senior Tutor; you will also be given anonymous feedback forms at the end of lecture series. If you have any problems with your tutor or concerns about any aspect of your tutorials, please contact your Director of Studies in the first instance. If for whatever reason you would prefer to speak to someone else, you can ask the college office for details of your alternative personal tutor.

Lectures

The latest lecture lists are advertised on the Faculty's [Canvas](#) site, which are sometimes not produced until the beginning of the relevant term.

Most lectures are held in one of two places: either the Gibson Building at the Old Radcliffe Infirmary site (not far from the Philosophy & Theology Faculties Library on Woodstock Road), or at the Examination Schools on the High Street, where all formal examinations also take place.

You should plan your lecture attendance well in advance. Use lectures as an opportunity to sample different subjects, and to see what is covered in certain papers when you're thinking about choosing your options later in your degree. Make sure you attend the core lectures for your papers; they aren't always perfectly coordinated, so you will mostly find that your lectures don't fall in the same term as your tutorials, but they are useful even after you've completed tutorials as consolidation and revision.

College examinations

At the beginning of each term, generally on Friday and Saturday of 0th week, there are examinations held in college, to review and assess the previous term's work. NB: You will of course NOT be asked to sit a college exam (also known as a 'collection') during your first week in Oxford; you will also have no exam in the first term (Michaelmas) of your second year, because you will have taken Prelims in the previous term.

These exams are taken very seriously by the college, and they are vital for you: not only do they offer benchmarks for your progress, they also give you invaluable exam practice in the period between your first and your final exams. You should take these procedural assessments seriously yourself. Prepare for them well in the weeks preceding 0th week. The advantages of good preparation include:

- A realistic indication of your performance and helpful guidance from your tutor.
- Time-saving when it comes to organising your notes for revision for the Real Thing later on.
- Avoidance of time-consuming and unnecessary retakes during term.

If your result for the college exam is significantly lower than could reasonably be expected on the basis of previous performance and reports, you will be asked to retake the exam, normally around the middle of the same term. This is a great nuisance not only for you but also for your tutors who have to mark the re-sit, and so is to be avoided at all costs. The fact that we put the resources into scheduling and marking these re-sits is an indication that we are in earnest about our responsibility for your academic oversight and development.

Course of Study

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Year 1 (Prelims)

You will study a set of three compulsory papers: Introduction to Biblical Studies, the Figure of Jesus through the Centuries, and Religion and Religions.

There is also a compulsory language component which gives you the opportunity to study one of the following: New Testament Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Vulgate Latin, Quranic Arabic, Pali, and Sanskrit.

The year will conclude with your first University examinations.

Years 2-3 (Final Honour School)

You will choose seven papers across four subject areas: Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Ethics, History of Religions, Religion and Religions.

All students will prepare a 12,000-word thesis on a topic of their choice.

Final University examinations: seven papers (assessed either by written examination or by submitted coursework, depending upon the option), plus a compulsory thesis.

PHILOSOPHY & THEOLOGY

Year 1 (Prelims)

You will study a set of three compulsory papers: the Figure of Jesus through the Centuries, Introduction to Philosophy, and Logic and Moral Philosophy.

You will also choose from one of the following: Introduction to the Study of the Bible, Religion and Religions, New Testament Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Vulgate Latin, Quranic Arabic, Pali, and Sanskrit.

The year will conclude with your first University examinations.

Years 2-3 (Final Honour School)

Students take eight papers, either five in Philosophy and three in Theology, or five in Theology and three in Philosophy, or four in each. A thesis may replace one of the eight papers. All students study the Philosophy paper Philosophy of Religion. Remaining papers are chosen from a wide range of options.

Final University examinations: eight papers assessed either by written examination or by submitted coursework, depending upon the option, or seven papers plus a thesis.

Full course descriptions can be found in the undergraduate FHS [handbook](#) on the Faculty website. The handbook is a vital source of important information about the course, so we strongly advise that you take the time to familiarise yourself with it.

Discipline

It is unusual that it becomes necessary for a student to be disciplined formally, but the College is not at all reticent about starting and seeing through a disciplinary process, and you should be concerned and responsive if this happens to you. Please familiarize yourself with the College handbook, Parts B (Academic Matters) and C (Decanal Matters) – see here:

<http://www.keble.ox.ac.uk/students/college-handbook>. Ensure that you observe the residency requirements each term.

You should regard college discipline not as nannying or an extension of the restrictions of school; you will be treated as an adult, with all the accountability that comes with adult status. Regard our behavioural guidelines and requirements as parallel to the codes of conduct and principles of collegiality that apply in all working environments. You have entered into a contract of mutual obligations by accepting your place at Keble, and the college should be an entirely congenial and supportive community for you, as long as the contract is respected.

In terms of academic discipline, the minimum expected for “good academic standing” is regular attendance at tutorials (with permission sought for any absences), completion of assignments as required at a standard commensurate with your abilities, and completion of college exams as scheduled. Failure to maintain these basic standards will lead in the first instance to an Informal Warning from your Director of Studies with conditions attached; then, if necessary, a Formal Warning given by the Senior Tutor. If the conditions of these successive periods of probation are not met, the matter will be dealt with by a committee and ultimately the Governing Body of the College, and the consequences could be far-reaching.

Be aware that plagiarism is not difficult to detect, and that it is a serious matter indeed, which may attract penalties. If you are in any doubt about the definition of plagiarism, see the University webpage: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism> .

Keble Theology: the community

The final note we want to strike is a more harmonious one, drawing attention to the cohesive and sociable, as well as intellectually flourishing, character of the theological community at Keble.

Watch out for notifications of the many significant and high-profile Theology seminars and lectures at Keble: the termly Hursley Society talks have drawn in some leading theologians (Tom Wright, Mona Siddiqui, Richard Hays, Timothy Winter, Mark Noll) and have covered talks on subjects from “Gang Violence and Restorative Justice” to “Can the West live with Islam?” There are also the annual Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lectures on aspects of spirituality and modern Christianity, which take place at both Keble Chapel and Westminster Abbey, in memory of a former Warden of Keble.

There are also regular social events in our calendar, some more official than others (your student college parents and subject reps will undoubtedly add to this list!). There is a Christmas drinks reception for all theologians, graduate and undergraduate, and another reception in Hilary Term after Prelims. Theology students are also invited to an annual Chaplaincy event early in Hilary Term, the Mitre Club Dinner, which is notable for costume requirements (innovative headgear), and for its festive atmosphere. In Trinity Term, after the finalists have finished their exams, there is a Black Tie dinner at Cherwell Boathouse for theologians. Finalists also have their “Schools Dinner”, a valedictory meal cooked by the Senior Common Room staff and served in one of the rooms of the SCR, at which supervising tutors are present.

Final words

Your time in Oxford will hopefully be one of the defining and formative periods in your life, and there will be unparalleled opportunities here for establishing friendships, exploring and exploiting your talents and interests, and for reflection and personal development. We are lucky to have you as students at Keble, full of energy and intellectual spark. But don't forget that your place is one that was coveted and hoped for by other, excellent candidates - hardly dreamed of by brilliant students in some parts of the world - and that the primary purpose of your time here is to make the most of that privilege, to reach the heights of all that you are capable of intellectually.

The Theology & Religion team at Keble