

Distance learning brings the freedom to explore ideas with intellectual rigour to unlikely places – and can create unexpected connections and possibilities for both tutor and student / By **KAREN KILBY**

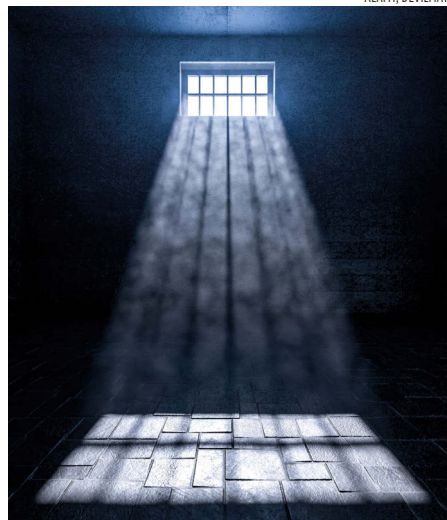
# Strange ways of theology

**“WE HAVE** good news to share. Naomi was released today after nine years in custody.” The email from my prison contact was unexpected and strange. I’d had my weekly telephone tutorial with Naomi the day before, discussing her latest piece of work for an MA in Catholic theology, and heard nothing special, certainly nothing about probationary hearings or an upcoming discharge. In fact the one unusual thing had been an invitation, by the staff member always present on our calls, for me to visit HMP Bronzefield when next in London.

I’d never asked what Naomi was in prison for. But I had wondered. What kind of thing do you have to do to end up for such a very long time in a high security prison? It’s not a question one feels one ought to ask, as a theology lecturer. But now that she is out, I’ve finally discovered the answer. And the answer is, it turns out ... nothing. Naomi had spent nine years, three months and 16 days on remand. She had never been formally accused of anything.

This seemed so deeply unbelievable that I had to speak to the prison chaplain, just to check the truth of what I was hearing. Apparently I am naive to imagine this kind of thing wouldn’t happen in Britain. There are others, I have learned from various sources, who are in a very similar position, held without charge for years. They might not be in prison quite so long as Naomi but they are less fortunate, because they usually don’t speak English.

**HOW COULD** anyone possibly be kept so long on remand, held year after year in a high security prison, without being formally accused? A confidentiality order is in place on Naomi’s apparently complex case. (For that reason I am using “Naomi” rather than the student’s actual name.) But Naomi was able to tell me a little: she is involved in proceedings related to political and human rights protection originating from another continent. A lawyer by training, Naomi tells me that the allegation against her would be a civil and not a criminal matter in the UK, and that even in the originating country, it would carry a maximum sentence of five years.



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What’s it like to suddenly re-enter society after more than nine years in an extremely regimented institution? For someone who was never a convicted prisoner, there is no system to help the transition, no support for reintegration. The shock of suddenly leaving prison was comparable to the shock of suddenly being thrown into it. Once again cut off from everything and everyone familiar. Once again all the patterns of one’s life are upended. How do you survive the supermarket without panic when people are coming at you from unpredictable angles? How do you choose a shampoo from so many possibilities? How do you catch up with nine years of technological change? How do you catch up with your friends when you are no longer the person you were before this experience, and no one on the outside can conceive of what you’ve been through? How do you set up a new life for yourself when the complex case is not yet resolved, when as an asylum seeker you’re prohibited from working, when you can’t speak with anyone other than your legal team about what is at the root of it all? I’m full of admiration for the commitment Naomi has shown, for the speed and determination with which she moves forward, for the many ways in which she is coping. But the situation remains, to me, unfathomably difficult.

Naomi is a regular reader of *The Tablet* (which is supplied to the prison by a donor). It was from *The Tablet* she learned of our Distance Learning programme. She sent us a handwritten letter, asking whether she might enrol. We were lucky to have bursary funds from generous partners to cover the tuition, and lucky again that the MA programme was set up with the flexibility to allow people with a variety of backgrounds to try a first module (“Catholic Theology: A Preliminary Tour”) to test whether academic theological study suits

them. From prison Naomi could not provide transcripts of past degrees, or take the test of English required of non-native speakers, but we were able to give her a try. And she proved to be one of the hardest working students I have known, very willing to be guided, very committed to struggling with challenging texts and getting to grips with complex theological ideas, as well as receptive to the personal and spiritual significance of studying theology.

In the section on medieval scholasticism, she wrote movingly about Thomas Aquinas’ famous dictum that “grace perfects and does not destroy nature”, and how it helped her make sense of her own development. But in our tutorials, I could also sense the lawyer coming through: she took charge of the agenda, pointed out any inconsistencies in the documentation for the module, made sure we got through any necessary practicalities each time we met, and efficiently but gently reminded me if there was anything I had forgotten to send. It was very strange to feel my student from prison lifting the burden of managing the conversation off me, making everything easy. Not what I had expected.

**I’VE COME** to think “Distance Learning” is a misleading description for what happens on this particular course in theology, because often it seems more truly to be about unusual possibilities for closeness – connections where normally they can’t be made. I’ve felt honoured to become, in some small way, close to someone who has gone through the crazy, illogical and terrible experience that Naomi has lived and is still living through, a kind of closeness to the brutal and senseless edges of our system that is not always possible to an academic working comfortably in a university. More generally I think it is wonderful that some of

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our students can become close to one another, enriched by conversations across their varied experience, across generations and continents, united by an intellectual thirst and a sense of “faith seeking understanding”. Perhaps it’s the nature of theology that it needs to do its work by seeping in strange ways into unexpected places – just as *The Tablet* itself sometimes seeps its way into unlikely spaces where it is needed most.

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