



Religious Studies

Understand. Analyse. Explain.

“If I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion because that’s how integrated religion is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today.”

John Kerry
US Secretary of State under
President Barack Obama

In a world shaped by religion, and divided by religious conflict, the academic and scientific study of religion has never been more important.

In Otago’s Religion Programme, you will critically examine religious beliefs and practices and their influence on human behaviour. You’ll investigate religion’s evolutionary origins, psychological underpinnings and historical development as well as its links with modern politics, law and social movements.

Looking beyond ‘mainstream’ religions, you’ll examine those new forms of spiritual practice that have emerged alongside the traditional religions. Religion approaches these phenomena with both critical spirit and empathy and offers explanations that believers might be reluctant to accept, while also attempting to understand the believer’s point of view

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Why study Religion?

Religion is as old as humanity itself. Despite the rise of science and modern technology, the majority of people in the world today are religious, and current demographic trends reveal that – as a whole – the world is becoming more religious. In order to understand humans, human history, and the contemporary world, we need to understand the multifaceted nature of religion and its place in human societies.

Religion offers you the opportunity to become familiar with religious movements, their history and the influence they currently wield. By studying religion, you will learn to enter empathetically into a world of thought that may be very different from your own, without losing the ability to ask critical questions about it.

Background required

Students of any religion, or none, are welcome. No previous qualifications are required, only a lively sense of curiosity and a willingness to grapple with important but difficult and contentious issues. It is possible to cross-credit previous study in Religion at another university.

Career opportunities

Our graduates have particular qualities valued by employers in many fields including:

- Excellent critical thinking and writing skills
- The ability to find information, analyse it in a logical and systematic manner, and communicate it clearly
- Wide-ranging knowledge of both human history, culture and contemporary affairs
- The ability to enter with empathy into the minds and hearts of others, to understand what motivates and shapes their behaviour.

Religious Studies graduates can be found in many walks of life, including MP, UN adviser, lecturer, analyst, archivist, development organiser, and even a TV show host.

Student exchange

You may be able to do part of your study overseas through the University's extensive student exchange programme or as a postgraduate student. In the exchange programme you pay only your New Zealand fees and complete your qualification within the same timeframe as if you'd never been away.

Religion at Otago

There are two core first-year papers in Religion. The first introduces students to Hinduism and Buddhism. It examines Hindu mythology, the teachings of the Buddha, religious disciplines such as yoga and meditation, the expression of religious devotion in art and architecture, and the role of the two religions in contemporary political debates in Asia.

The second introduces students to the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It examines their origin in the land of Palestine, a cross-roads of ancient civilisation, and the way in which each tradition gradually took on its distinctive modern form. It discusses the ways in which all three faiths have responded to the challenges of modernity.

More advanced papers in Religion include Psychology of Religion, Zen Buddhism, Ancient Religion: Egypt to Mesopotamia as well as other courses which examine religion in connection with topic like science and magic, law and politics, or the human body.

How will I study?

Students enrolled in first-year courses in Religion attend two lectures each week as well as take part in small-group tutorial sessions. In addition to a final exam, there is internal assessment for each course. This normally involves one major assignment or essay, as well as other shorter assignments.

For those who cannot study on-campus, it is possible to take most Religion papers by distance study, regardless of where you live in New Zealand.

Study combinations

Since few areas of human life have remained untouched by religious influence, Religion combines well with many subjects in the Humanities. Human history has been profoundly shaped by religious beliefs and conflicts, while the study of literature and art is greatly enhanced by a knowledge of religious beliefs and symbols. Skills and insights are therefore readily transferable between Religious Studies and subjects such as Anthropology, History, Classics, Politics, and Philosophy.

While most Religion students take the subject as part of a general Arts degree, it is also very popular among students doing Commerce, Law, and the Sciences. Religion taken as a minor subject in another degree programme can add variety to that programme and broaden the range of subjects that can be included in your CV. It is also possible to take a minor in Buddhist Studies.

Further study

Postgraduate studies include master's degrees by research or by coursework (either in Religion or in Buddhist Studies) and a PhD. Graduates in Religion who choose to go overseas have been accepted for postgraduate study at some of the world's best universities.

PROFILE

Miriam Jenkins

Graduate, Religious Studies (BA)

I was at Otago for Summer School and was browsing the course catalogue for something interesting. The paper "Love and Heroism: Religion in South India" caught my eye, so I enrolled. I wasn't disappointed – it's still the most fascinating and engaging course I've taken, and it led me to select Religious Studies as my major.

I had the best time studying at Otago! I found that all the staff were very invested in what they teach, and willing to go out of their way to help. It's a well-equipped university campus in a lovely city with great beaches, and I spent hours in the central library reading and composing essays, and trying to get through all the Tamil poetry anthologies.

After graduating, I lived in the US and worked at Nike, and then went on to live in Hokkaido, Japan, on the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme. Later I returned to New Zealand and worked at the Department of Conservation, before I accepted the role of Competitions Co-ordinator for World Para Athletics at the International Paralympic Committee in Bonn, Germany.

The study of religion is such a fascinating way to gain insight into people and communities. Since religion and faith are practised in such wildly varying ways around the world, my background has helped me to adjust my viewpoint when working in a multicultural office, and also at competitions abroad. Having the knowledge from my degree allows me to approach situations differently, more delicately and with respect for everyone involved.

I was so inspired and impressed by the staff in the department that I hoped I could follow in their path and have an academic career too! Since embarking on this degree I've been compelled to continue to learn as much as I can, and I aim to keep studying and eventually share what I've learned with new students. Our world can benefit greatly from more people having a better understanding of religion and faith, and tolerance and acceptance of what's different.



For questions about
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otago.ac.nz/religion

