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 are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today.”

John Kerry
US Secretary of State under 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.
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

Lucy Wilson BALLB

Lucy Wilson never planned on taking Religious Studies, but after taking first-year paper Introduction to Hinduism and Buddhism she was “hooked” and decided to major in Religious Studies alongside her law degree, focusing on religion in Asia.

“What I really like about Religious Studies is that it is super multi-disciplinary. It is a blend of so many other disciplines like history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, politics and law. I found this variety really refreshing.”

For Lucy, Religious Studies also opened up new areas and ways of doing things. “Religious Studies helped me to look at the world from different perspectives and to question everything I thought was true.”

She particularly enjoyed learning about how different belief systems impact people’s worldviews. “Learning about Hindu creation narratives and Buddhist concepts like no-self and dependent origination was pretty mind-blowing for me. I can honestly say I have enjoyed every single Religious Studies paper I have taken.”

She has also enjoyed delving into more niche topics towards the end of her degree. She recently took a paper titled Zen Buddhism and one titled Religion, Science and Magic and says, “they were both so interesting it didn’t really feel like study.”

Her advice for first-years considering studying Religious Studies is to just take a paper and see what happens. “It’s important to understand different world views and even if you don’t end up studying Religious Studies, the knowledge you gain is invaluable.”

For questions about Religious Studies
otago.ac.nz/religion