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# What is the Study of Religion \s? Self-Presentations of the Discipline on University Web Pages

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## Foreword

Here is the first research article on the religious studies project website. In fact, the article also deals with websites: it analyzes the ways in which religious studies (the study of religion\s) is presented on an international sample of university-websites. The authors think this is an important issue for the discipline since these websites are much used nodes of interface between the discipline and its audiences within or beyond the walls of the university. There was no Religious Studies Project website when the authors began working on this article (back in 2010), but coincidentally this seems like the perfect place to publish such a study. Since the text is quite long, Knut Melvær has developed the typographic features on the site, including pop-up footnotes (try mouseover the footnote numbers) and the “sticky” table of contents. [Publishing this article online also allows us to make our data-set \(“codebook”\) available.](#)

We are looking forward to your thoughts and reactions in the comment section below.

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# Introduction

Even if the ‘public intellectual’ may not be the preferred job description and role model of all scholars of religion (McCutcheon 2001), there is no way of getting around the fact that the study of religion, as a discipline practiced at universities around the world, engages in public communication outside the institutional ivory towers.<sup>1</sup> In different capacities and to varied degrees scholars of religion are involved in public communication and the study of religion is itself also an object of public communication. Which roles is it expected to play, and which tasks is it expected to perform? How is the discipline perceived and understood in public discourse? Does it get its messages across? Has it contributed to literacy in religious matters? How is its knowledge distinguished from common-sense assumptions?<sup>2</sup>

**How does the study of religion want to be understood by the public, in communication with its audiences and stakeholders?**

Conversely, in the present article we investigate how the discipline presents itself to the public. What is the study of religion, how does it want to be understood by the public, in communication with its audiences and stakeholders? By far the main communicative interface between the discipline and the general public is the internet. People may just make a Google search for ‘religious studies’, ‘study of religion’, ‘history of religions’ or terms like these if they want to know something about this academic and intellectual enterprise. Given the way that Google’s search algorithm is currently set up, one of the top hits would likely be the relevant entry in Wikipedia, i.e. “Religious Studies”. For the critical positioning of the discipline it would be interesting, and maybe even necessary, to analyze the presentation and perception of the study of religion as an academic discipline in relevant segments of the internet, including various encyclopaedias or other important sources of information. The present article looks at another interface between the discipline and the public sphere: the self-presentation of the discipline, or the subject, on the websites of universities where it is currently taught.

Most universities with departments of the study of religion

(under its various names) and offering relevant programs provide some kind of information about the discipline, its practitioners, its educational dimension and ongoing research. While the information given on these web pages is accessible to everybody and where pages may be visited for unpredictable reasons, we assume that most web pages probably have prospective and current students as their main target audience. One also expects these pages to present the relevance and profile of the discipline for a more non-specific audience, in addition to colleagues searching for research-related information and the media looking for experts and sources of information.

Such web pages may well be the most important medium for the discipline to present itself to the public and to its present and future or prospective practitioners. Based on a content analysis of a multinational sample of web pages as per the period October – December 2010 (when we retrieved the relevant data), the present article analyzes patterns of self-presentation of the study of religion\

s. Note that not all these web pages are necessarily written by practitioners of the discipline. We know of some universities where the content of the web pages is effectively beyond control of the faculty, and in many other cases the university imposes restrictions on possible content (in terms of length or kinds of content to be covered, often in the form of templates). In this article, however, we are less concerned with the perspective of the authors, but with the content found on the sites, given that the university web pages convey the impression of describing the discipline and/or the program as understood at the respective institution.

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## The Sample

**The present analysis focuses on two kinds of web pages: those of departments and those of programs**

While there appears to be no international standard on how university websites are organized, information about educational programs, information about research, and information about faculty (typically listed under departments or

schools) feature separately on most websites. The present analysis focuses on two kinds of web pages: those of departments and those of programs in the study of religion\

It includes only web pages that make some sort of general statements on the study of religion\ by addressing the nature and the working of the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

In our sampling we started with the website of our own department and those of other Norwegian universities and then cast our net wider. Our final sample comprises 101 texts gathered from websites of 70 universities located in Northern Europe/Scandinavia (Denmark [3], Finland [4], Norway [5], Sweden [7]), Western/South Western Europe (Germany [11], the Netherlands [5], Spain [2], Switzerland [6], UK ([England: 8; Scotland: 6]), North America (Canada [9], USA [22]), the Pacific (Australia [5], New Zealand [6]), and South Africa (2). (See the appendix for the full list of universities and a key to the text IDs used for references in the following.)

Our sample can seem somewhat biased towards some countries or cultural areas.<sup>4</sup> Some readers might for example object that the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) are represented by almost as many cases (19 in total) as the United States (22), even though the total number of departments and programs is many times higher in that country. As our sampling strategy aimed at covering national diversity (which we experience as very real distinctions in academic cultures not the least in terms of languages) this strategy clearly privileges Europe with a total of 57 cases, amounting to 56 per cent of our total text sample and 66 per cent of our university sample. Even the European sample, however, does not include all potentially relevant countries. In particular, the European sample excludes Eastern and Central Eastern Europe (mainly for reasons of limited linguistic competence).

Our sampling strategy could not attempt to achieve statistical representativeness for the simple reason that, as far as we can see, there is no reliable data available on the population or the universe (i. e. the totality of all departments and programs in the study of religion\), and hence there is no means of knowing to

what extent this population could be represented accurately by our sample. However, in sampling we sought to cover internationally recognized (by scholarly standards) departments, so that our sample can hopefully claim some degree of ecological validity. For the United States, for example, we tried to include some of the biggest graduate programs.

Even for our selection of countries, given the variety of educational landscapes, media cultures, national contexts of the discipline and the different sizes of the countries, our sample is not, and cannot be, representative in strictly statistical terms. Yet, we hope that our analysis provides some significant findings with relevance for the ongoing critical self-reflection of the discipline. Obviously, statistical data analysis can be used (and is commonly used) even if a sample is not representative and if a study does not aim at arriving at statistically representative findings. Such methods allow us to explore general patterns (and non-patterns) and recurrent themes (or idiosyncratic features) in the material.

The longest text in our sample contains 941 words (University of Alabama #27), while the shortest text has only 34 words (University of Bremen #49). There are a total of eight cases with texts numbering more than 600 words, and there are nine cases using less than 100 words. The arithmetic mean for the sample is 302 words, while the median is 217 words. Given that some texts are longer, it is also likely that they are overrepresented in the following discussion.<sup>5</sup>

While the study of religion is a global enterprise (Alles 2008), our sample was intended to reflect the traditionally predominant 'Western' topography of international discourse as it is manifested in international core publications of the field (like the major international journals and works of reference). A minor selection of texts from some further countries published in languages accessible to us would have confounded our sample more than it would have added in clarity. However, we invite scholars from other regions, or with expertise on such regions, to replicate our study and test our findings, if deemed interesting, with a different sample.

Having decided on the sample, we downloaded the texts from the various web pages. We then analyzed the texts for recurrent information and motives. As a result of several rounds of discussion, based on the textual corpus initially generated, we inductively created several categories, which we used to code the downloaded texts. These categories encompass different aspects of the meaning and identity of a scholarly discipline as transmitted at universities. Starting from its name or designation to the definition of its nature and subject matter, we look at statements about its aims, goals and purposes, its methods and main approaches, its relevance, its main thematic issues and areas of specialization, its relationships to other disciplines and field (the disciplinary matrix) and its demarcation from other discourses about its subject matter.<sup>6</sup> Given that educational transmission is part of what makes scholarly enterprises into disciplines, we also coded the websites for statements about skills, attitudes and competence ideally transmitted to incoming practitioners of the discipline and employment prospects and career options of graduates, as these aspects are increasingly perceived to be part of education and disciplinary training. Finally, while all these statements are of a verbal nature, we were also interested in the visual aspect of the presentation of the texts.

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## Designations

**Contrary to disciplines such as history, psychology, or sociology, the study of religion\’s does not sail under the flag of one common name.**

Contrary to disciplines such as history, psychology, or sociology, the study of religion\’s does not sail under the flag of one common name. Partly, this is the result of the specific genealogy of the discipline, partly of competing self-understandings, partly of different discursive and national contexts. Which designations are used in our sample? Given that we are dealing with texts in different languages, we had to collate semantically synonymous expressions into single categories. Moreover, we found that the names of departments and programs and the names used for the discipline used in the texts can at times diverge. Some cases use different designations.<sup>7</sup>

Two designations by far dominate our sample:

- Religionswissenschaft (including religionsvitenskap, religionsvetenskap, Ciencias de las Religiones, and sciences des religions): 22 universities, amounting to slightly more than a third of all 70 universities in our sample. With one exception (Université Laval #71) all cases are from Europe (Denmark [2], Germany [5], Norway [3], Spain [1], Sweden [5], Switzerland [5]).
- Religious Studies (including Religionsstudier): 21 universities, amounting to 30 per cent of all cases. This name is used by universities in Canada (3), Denmark (1), England (1), the Netherlands (2), New Zealand (4), Scotland (1), South Africa (1), and the USA (8).

In addition to these two predominant designations, which account for 61 per cent (43/70), i. e. almost two thirds, of all cases in our sample, there are six others that occur in between two to five instances each:

- Comparative religion: four universities, including two in Finland, one in the Netherlands, and one in the USA (The University of Washington #30).
- Religion: four universities, including one in Scotland, one in Canada, one in New Zealand, and two in the USA. Typically, “religion” features as a department name.
- The study of religion: four universities, two in Canada, one in England and one in the United States (Duke University (#97/98), where one finds “the study of religion” or “the academic study of religion”).
- Studies in Religion: three universities, all in Australia.
- Theology and Religious Studies: two universities, both in the UK (England, Scotland).
- History of Religions (religionshistorie and religionshistoria): two universities, one in Norway and one in Sweden.

If one were to code ‘Studies in Religion’ and ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ together with ‘Religious Studies’, that category would comprise 27 cases, which would make it the largest

category. In addition, there are two unique cases that also combine Religious Studies with another designation. While Divinity clearly refers to theology, it seems that Religious Studies in the latter case also means theology:

- Divinity and Religious Studies (University of Aberdeen #33)
- Religious Studies and Comparative Religion (Manchester University #60)

**Designations such as Comparative Religion and History of Religions, which were important in former times, are now used by very few universities.**

In sum, designations such as Comparative Religion and History of Religions, which were important in former times, are now used by very few universities (less than ten per cent). While Religionswissenschaft and its cognate denominations prevail in continental Europe (with the exception of the Netherlands), Religious Studies predominates in the Anglo-sphere, with the Australian Studies in Religion as one national variety. In the UK, however, one finds several denominations, sometimes in combination with divinity/theology (which does not imply that there are no theologians or theological elements in departments and programs carrying other names). The Study of Religions is not (yet) established as a current term, even though several national and international associations carry this designation in their names<sup>8</sup>.

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## **'Religion'**

Webpages from 29 universities, corresponding to some 41 per cent of our sample of universities, provide some kind of definitions of the nature of the study of religion\'. In one way or the other, almost all of these statements make the point that the study of religion\'.s studies 'religion', religious traditions or religious phenomena as its subject matter.<sup>9</sup> Given this explicit delimitation and the extensive discussions about the concept and definition of 'religion' during the past decades, one would not have been surprised to find adumbrations of these discussions, if not explicit reflections on these issues, on the webpages. Yet, it turns out that this is not the case; one wonders whether the



webpages seek to avoid being dragged into these abysmal problems.

The most prominent feature of religion evoked by the definitional statements in our sample, in eleven cases, is an appeal to the variety or diversity of religion, religious expressions or phenomena, in time and space. In two cases this corresponds to highlighting the complexity and in one case each the universality of religion or the comparative outlook of the study of religion\

**Only six out of 101 texts contain what we would categorize as explicit definitions of religion, i.e. statements that specify what religion is or religions are (about).**

s.<sup>10</sup> Only six out of 101 texts contain what we would categorize as explicit definitions of religion, i.e. statements that specify what religion is or religions are (about). We are here not thinking of general statements such as “Religion is a major force in human experience” (Indiana University #101), that religions are “historical and cultural phenomena” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill #32), or that religion is “an essential aspect of the cultures of the world and the interactions among them” (University of Toronto #74).<sup>11</sup> Instead, we have in mind more comprehensive and precise determinations that aim at determining the nature of religion\

s. Note that four out of these six definitional statements are found on continental European websites (plus one from New Zealand and one from Canada). Only one of these definitions recalls recent debates about the notion of religion:

Religion as such does not exist. It is a concept developed in the West as a label for a wide variety of human ideas and behaviour, which are centered around human interaction with postulated (non- or meta-empirical) realities.

#### **Leiden University #68**

While the different definitions play on different theoretical registers, they all emphasize the agency of religion; religion mainly occurs in the active mode. This active voice also resonates in various ‘religion is’ and ‘religion has’ statements or other verbal qualifiers (like ‘to affect’, ‘to shape’, ‘to function’, ‘to set forward’, ‘to underpin’, ‘to matter’, etc.) which occur throughout the corpus of texts.

The texts refer to vast areas of impact of religion, mainly on politics and conflicts, but also generally pertaining to behavior and “human culture and experience” (University of Cape Town #75). Only a minority of texts point to ambivalent or contradictory effects of religion<sup>12</sup> and/or they express the statements as a possibility (‘can’; University of Groningen #52; Södertörn University #16; University of Zurich #90). One text makes the point that religion can be a host of different things (Södertörn University #16, which then lists a series of examples). In one case, the possible impact of religion is linked to the motivational force of religious beliefs; this source also refers to conflicting claims by stating that religions “are sometimes accused of limiting or repressing people, yet also offer resources which sustain people through times of suffering and oppression” (University of Glasgow #34), which could be read as a defence of religion against its denouncers. The interdependence of religion with examples of other human constructs is repeatedly mentioned in the texts, especially with culture (yet the agency in these relations is typically assigned to religion).

**The emphasis of the impact of religion and its active agency constitute a ‘claim of relevance’.**

The emphasis of the impact of religion and its active agency constitute a ‘claim of relevance’. It is unclear to what extent this claim results from empirical research. One way of explaining the persistent presence of this claim of relevance is the rhetorical and communicative setting of the texts, which frames them not primarily as information tools but as advertisement and marketing devices.<sup>13</sup> Given that producers of the websites may expect their users to be primarily non-scholars, in particular potential students (and the number of students-intake is often decisive for the future viability of the departments or programs), and given that they may expect that only ‘relevant’ matters attract attention and students, this may result in a relatively uncritical overemphasis on the general importance and agency of religion. We have no means of knowing how effective this marketing strategy is. Yet, if our reading of the ‘claim of relevance’ as a sales strategy to highlight the relevance and necessity for the ‘product’ of our scholarly activities, the study of religion\,s, is justified, then it raises the ethical question how far is it legitimate to proclaim things as facts that many would admit

in other contexts to be mere assumptions.

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## Religions

As indicated above, several websites state that the study of religion\’s deals with all religions or with a wide cross-cultural range of religions/religious phenomena. These general claims are illustrated on a number of websites with examples. Some 32 web pages provide names of religions (e.g. Islam), of cultural/historical religious traditions (e.g. Egyptian religion), of types of religions (e.g. world religions), of types of religious traditions (e.g. religions without writing), of historical phenomena (e.g. New Religious Movements), of larger geographical units (e.g. the Mediterranean), of macro-geographic units such as continents (e.g. African religions), of modern nations (e.g. religions in Canada) or of cities (religion in Leeds, which is the only case of that type), or related concepts (e.g. spirituality).

Numerically, one group of religions is mentioned far more often than the rest. This groups comprises Islam and Hinduism (18 cases each), Buddhism (17), Christianity (16), and Judaism (14). In our sample, these clearly are the salient examples, or prototypical religions. In practice, then, it seems that the traditional world-religion model is still the dominant one.

There is a second group of religions mentioned by far fewer, i.e. two to five, cases: Confucianism (5), Taoism (4), Sikhism (3), Jainism (2), and New Age (2). This category also comprises some collective terms such as East and South Asia (4), African religion (3), ancient Mediterranean religions (3), religions of China (2), religions in Japan (2), Asian religions (2), religions in America (2), Amerindian religions (2). All other cases are single (‘idiosyncratic’) examples.

The debates about the alleged *sui generis* character of religion and, accordingly, the study of it, have raised the issue of its disciplinary belonging. In our sample, something less than a quarter (24/101) of the texts address the disciplinary setting of the study of religion\'. This happens on several levels. To begin with, there is the context of the university, with faculty having duties in “other university departments and academic programs” (University of Waterloo #63) or by closely cooperating “with other departments in the college and professional schools which have interests in the study of religion” (Emory University #99).

**The web pages clearly show a hesitation to affirm the disciplinary status of the study of religion\’.**

On a meta-level, the study of religion\’ is sometimes classified as being part of a branch, class, division or family of academic labor. The University of Vermont regards the study of religion\’ as “a crucial part of the wider study of human cultures, global affairs, and personal identities” (#28). More established terms such as the humanities or the social sciences are invoked by relatively few cases.<sup>14</sup> From the fact that the “academic study of religion draws directly on all of the humanities and social sciences” the University of Miami concludes that “it invites us to think in a fuller, more integral way about human life” (#26).<sup>15</sup> Three cases refer the study of religion\’ as a field of study (University of Turku #9; UC Santa Barbara #22; University of Groningen #53). Only two cases identify the study of religion\’ as a ‘discipline’—and even this not in the full sense of an academic discipline. While the University of Waikato speaks of a “university discipline” (#84), Duke University opts for the somewhat paradoxical term “interdisciplinary discipline” (#97), emphasizing that it “employs a wide variety of approaches and methods in order to understand the role of religion in both human experience and thought” (#97). In addition, three definitions point to its multi-, trans-, or interdisciplinary nature.<sup>16</sup> The web pages clearly show a hesitation to affirm the disciplinary status of the study of religion\’. It is also commonly recognized that the study of religion\’ has several branches or sub-disciplines. Anthropology, psychology, or sociology of religion are typical sub-disciplines, even though most active scholars in these fields may well be employed at departments in these disciplines rather than in departments of the study of

religion\

A greater desire to spell out the disciplinary context of the study of religion\ can be found in Germany and Switzerland, where several texts (University of Bremen #49; LMU Munich #51; University of Zurich #90; University of Berne #92; University of Lucerne #93) firmly identify the study of religion\ as being a Kulturwissenschaft.<sup>17</sup> In one case (Bremen) this label is combined with that of Geisteswissenschaft and in another case (Lucerne) with that of the social sciences. As the only non-German speaking example of this contextualisation, the University of Turku refers to a “close relation to different aspects of Cultural Sciences” (#10). Other cases classify the study of religion\ as a humanistic education (Aarhus University #8) or as an education in cultural history (University of Copenhagen #6).

In our sample, four cases explicitly insist on a distinction from theology. One main criterion of distinction put forward by the web pages is the insider/outsider separation: “What the programs offer are not theological studies from within any given religious tradition” (University of Ottawa #73); the study of religion\ “is not grounded in any particular religious tradition but deals even-handedly with religions found throughout the world” (Massey University #80). This issue is related to that of normativity: as the University of Ottawa web page makes clear, the “programs do not consider any religious tradition to be normative” (#73). The University of Alabama identifies the distinction in the different kinds of “data” used by these two “enterprises”: “the academic study of religion studies people, their beliefs, and their social systems; the theological study of religion studies God/the gods and their impact on people” (#27).<sup>18</sup> The University of Copenhagen takes a more pragmatic perspective: contrary to theology, the study of religion\ does not educate future priests, and even where it studies Christianity it regards this as a religion in a given cultural and societal context (#6).

The demarcation of boundaries from its confessional or theological other and religious discourses is also made explicit in

a few definitional statements from Europe, South Africa, and the United States. The University of Washington briefly remarks that the Comparative Religion Program from the start “intended not to teach religion, but to teach about it” (#30). The University of Lausanne proposes that religions are studied in a non-confessional and ‘exterior’ manner, which is here linked to an implicit definition or theory of religion that regards religions as products of human cultural activity (#95).<sup>19</sup> The University of Zurich explicitly holds that it is not part of the business of the study of religion\ to fathom religious truth or to decide which religions are better than other. Moreover, scholars of religion do not need to be religious themselves (University of Zurich #91).

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## Topics

Besides studying a series of religions and religious phenomena in given geographical contexts, the study of religion\ is also concerned with aspects of religion (such as myth or ritual) or topics relating to religion (such as gender or power). What kind of topics (aspects of religion and issues related to religion) is the study of religion\ concerned with according to our sample of websites?<sup>20</sup> While some websites mention such topics in a general manner, other cases refer to research topics of faculty or to potential areas of specialization for undergraduate and graduate students (or topics of past student papers); others, last but not least, list topics of courses that are offered by the respective department or as part of the respective program.

Using these criteria, from our sample of 101 texts, 39 contain relevant information. In total (in our coding) 75 keywords (identified by separate codes) emerged. The majority of these (44) are ‘idiosyncratic’ items, i. e., they are mentioned by only one text. Several of these keywords, however, have been central stage in recent research in the discipline/field. Consider topics such as (in alphabetic order) cognition, ecology (and, in addition, climate change), emotion, ethnicity, gods, health, human rights, identity, immigration, law, media, pluralism,

popular religion, post-colonialism, power, race, state, and terrorism. The history of the study of religion\ is likewise mentioned by one text only (The University of Ottawa #72).<sup>21</sup> Not represented at all are issues such as evolution or evolutionary theory and material culture (but built environments, i.e. architecture, is mentioned once).



Figure 1: Word cloud of topics mentioned on two or more web pages

Keywords with two or more occurrences are here presented visually in a word cloud<sup>22</sup>, where terms with the lowest frequency (2) are smallest going up in size to those with the highest frequency (11). The ‘interaction of religion’ variable functions as an umbrella code that also encompasses a variety of other keywords; note that we only coded cases using terms like ‘connections’, ‘interaction’, ‘interplay’, ‘interrelationship’, ‘intersection’, and ‘relation’, but we did not include cases that speak of the ‘effect’ of given issues on religion such as the effects of globally connected structures of communication on the emergence of religious ideas and practices mentioned by the University of Zurich (#90) or how such issues affect religion.

At the top of the list, one finds the following four broad

categories: politics (10 cases from nine universities), culture (11), ethics (11 from ten universities), and history (11 from ten universities). Each of these represents over a quarter of all texts relevant for this section, and around 10 per cent of the entire sample. Numerically, they appear as the most typical and salient topics in the study of religion according to our sample of websites. Apparently, the web pages are primarily concerned with appealing to common ground with other disciplines.

**Given that ethics rarely discussed in major companions and handbooks, its prominence in our sample is somewhat surprising.**

Given that ethics rarely discussed in major companions and handbooks, its prominence in our sample is somewhat surprising. What does that topic cover? To begin with, as in the case of politics and culture, there are the religion-ethics connections (University of Stirling #38; University of Toronto #74). Duke University addresses ethics as a specific feature of religions just like gender, visual modes, and mysticism (#98), while the University of Southern Denmark (#7) is concerned with the distinctions between religious and non-religious ethics. The department text at Emory University refers to a course on ethics (#99), but when speaking of ethics it is unclear whether that deals with ethics in relation to historical religions or with ethics from a religious background. At Indiana University, it is clearly stated that some faculty members are “primarily ethicists” (#102), and one of the five course areas at the University of Waterloo is called “theology, philosophy, and ethics” (#63). At Uppsala University students analyze difficult ethical problems (#15), while McGill has BA and MA specializations in bioethics (#66), the University of Queensland pays attention to stem-cell research (#85) and Emory University (#100) is concerned with “long-standing debates” over medical ethics (among other issues). From our perspective, all this squarely fits the business of theology and philosophy but is situated outside the realm of a discipline/field seeking to account for religion as historical phenomena (which is where the present writers situate themselves).



**The identity of an academic discipline is also determined by the aims and goals it sets itself.**

The identity of an academic discipline, particularly in the shape of programs of study, is also determined by the aims and goals it sets itself. In total, we coded 29 cases as containing explicit or implicit statements about the purpose of the study of religion\ and/or the aims of the programs. The two most-used key-words are knowledge (11 cases) and understanding (10 occurrences).<sup>23</sup> Only very few cases specify the desired kind of knowledge in any way. The Complutense University of Madrid, for example, speaks of providing ‘rational and critical knowledge’ of ‘the religious fact and the evolution of the different religious traditions’ (#77).<sup>24</sup> ‘Critical’ or ‘critique’ are recurrent keywords in seven cases, but these terms have a wide range of meanings covering, for example, source criticism and critical theory. The Université Laval proposes the development of a ‘general religious culture’, but adds to this the unfolding of a critical sense both towards one’s own experiences and towards religious and spiritual phenomena (#71).<sup>25</sup>

The University of Canterbury launches ‘cultural literacy’ as an ultimate aim and holds that one cannot achieve this if one fails to understand the role played by religion and ‘critically’ engages with them (#79). The University of Zurich seeks to provide knowledge and (inter- or trans-) ‘cultural competence’ and thereby hopes to contribute to tolerance and communication or understanding (#90). While this aim refers to a potential societal contribution by the study of religion\, some other texts, from England and the United States, focus on the desired moral qualities of their alumni. The program at Leeds University wishes to “equip students for understanding, living and working reflectively and responsibly within a plural society” (#58). At Arizona State University, “the faculty of Religious Studies seek to foster civic responsibility and global awareness” (#96). Emory University’s Department of Religion “engages students to understand themselves better as moral agents in the world, and to help them appreciate the moral and spiritual dimensions of the interpretive activity they pursue in the study of religion” (#99). The study of religion\ is here not only conceived as having a moral dimension (in terms of research ethics), but also as having a spiritual one.

In the educational process, the aims, goals, intent and purpose of the study of religion\’s are ideally converted into skills and qualifications to be acquired by students and graduates. If properly transmitted and internalized, the theoretical dimension of the academic practice translates into practical knowledge; the students will acquire a specific competence if the discipline performs well. In total, we identified 24 texts (from 21 universities) as containing statements on skills and competences. In several respects, there is an overlap with the aims and goals of the programs.<sup>26</sup> Here is a text from the University of Queensland (#85):

Studying Religion can:

- Develop your understanding and knowledge of the cultural foundations and current trends in many religious and spiritual movements
- Provide insight into the cultural settings in which various religions are practised, showing ways that societies and individuals construct their own ideas of the spiritual and therefore their own sense of identity
- Offer you the chance to learn Arabic, Greek, Pali and Sankrit [sic!] to gain insight into other cultures
- Promote respect, appreciation and understanding of religious and cultural diversity
- Encourage reflection on your own world view

The reader will immediately recall some keywords and leitmotifs from the aims and scope section (above). Yet, the text is apparently addressed to potential students and its intention is not to make a pronouncement on the aims and scope of the discipline but to list the benefit or pay-off that prospective students can expect to derive from studying religion. The text addresses intellectual, ethical and personal traits. It seems to suggest that the study of religion\’s makes students more respectful, appreciative, and understanding with regard to cultural diversity, which is an attitude, but not a skill.

Encouraging reflection on one\’s world-view (note that the text here avoids speaking of religion) is neither an aim of the discipline nor is it a skill of the student, but a process leading to developing a more reflected and often mature attitude. Another text from the Pacific area, Massey University, similarly announces that students will have the opportunity for personal

reflection without being directly exposed to a specific religious message: “Religious Studies will not give you the answers to life’s mysteries, but it will stimulate and inform your own reflection” (#80).

In almost identical wording (which might raise the issue of plagiarism, which unlike scholarly production seems to be tolerated in this kind of texts), two Norwegian texts assert that students will receive knowledge about the relationship between religion and society and a unique cross-cultural competence.<sup>27</sup> Several cases appeal to skills of relevance for plural societies. This includes talk of (unspecified) “practical skills needed for understanding and operating in situations where cultures interact” (University of Helsinki #12), “skills in analysis and human interaction” (Lancaster University #55), “a multidisciplinary critical skills base in the area of religion for those in training for, or active within, professions that engage with the religious aspect of multicultural societies” (University of New England #89), “qualifications and skills appropriate for personal development, professional employment and further study in a secular society where religious issues remain influential, though are often unrecognised” and “interpersonal and intellectual skills of empathy with critical distance” (University of Waikato #58).

Some web pages speak of communicative skills in a more technical sense, that of so-called soft or transferable skills. None of these are specific to the study of religion\’s. Communication and writing are connected to skills of effectively disseminating academic knowledge to other audiences. Yet, in our sample, it is only the University of Southern Denmark (#7) that emphasizes this skill. In the text, it figures next to adopting an ‘analytical-critical’ attitude towards public debates.

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## **Career Prospects and Employment Perspectives**

Some texts create a link between talking about to the skills and competences students have acquired by taking a program and

potential employment perspectives (#24, #38, #39, #89).<sup>28</sup> The career options mentioned here tend to be somewhat vague; the most extreme case, which actually ends up by tracking no path of employment in particular, comes from the University of Cape Town: “Such study provides not only valuable insights into the world in which we live, but also the skills of critical analysis, conceptual thought and imaginative empathy that will allow you to pursue a rewarding career after university” (#76).

26 texts from 23 universities in our sample have something to say about career and employment prospects of their candidates. Three web pages—from Canada, New Zealand, and the USA—address the professional achievements of their alumni. Since they point to a vast array of career options they may be worth quoting in full; by providing some geographical details the Canadian case gives a more authentic and reliable feel:

Some of our Religious Studies majors have found the following jobs: Physician in Sioux Lookout, Ontario; Director of Development Agency in Uganda; Chaplain at Correctional Services Canada; Program Assistant at The Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse; Teacher of Religion in the RCSS Board; Program Co-ordinator at Catholic Family Services; Youth Pastor in a United Mennonite Church. “

**University of Waterloo #64**

Former graduates of our programme have gone on to become journalists, artists, musicians, film directors, teachers, gallery directors, librarians and academics.

**University of New Zealand #79**

Since the inception of the Religious Studies major at the University in the fall of 2000, students have explored careers in public health, medicine, law, ministry, finance, the Peace Corps, and Teach for America.

**The University of Texas at Austin #25**

Some statements are of a very general nature. Several texts point to the various career opportunities opened up by their respective programs, but they usually list some very broad sectors (University of Southern Denmark #8; University of New England #89; University of Lucerne #93; Arizona State University #96; Duke University #97). Emory University makes it implicitly clear

that concrete career opportunities can emerge as a result of an educational intersection of a degree in the study of religion\’s with other forms of education: “The broad and deep preparation that Religion Majors develop intersects effectively with preparation in such vocations as medicine, law, business, and public affairs“ (#100). Similarly, VU Amsterdam states: “The path you take with your degree in Religious Studies mainly depends on the specialization you opt for in the Master’s phase” (#70).

**“...take up a position as a spiritual advisor...”**

Given its privileged outsider perspective and intent to distinguish itself from religious discourses, does the study of religion\’s qualify for careers directly pertaining to religion? This case is indeed made by several texts from countries in different continents. One text claims that the program prepares candidates for occupations requiring solid knowledge about religions, the relations between religion, culture and society, and a sensitivity for inter-religious relations (University of Bayreuth #39), but the text does not provide names of applicable occupations. The University of Texas at Austin refers to fields that value “the ability to operate in a complex religious setting” (#24), but does not mention which vocations these fields may comprise in particular. The University of New England refers to “professions that engage with the religious aspect of multicultural societies” and it goes on by enumerating a series of such professions: “law, teaching, social work, counselling, journalism, public service, business, marketing, defence, and foreign service, to name but a few” (#89). While it here is the multi-religious aspect of many contemporary societies that potentially qualifies candidates, the University of Canterbury refers to religious institutions as potential employers: “Those interested in careers within religious institutions will find that it affords them a valuable perspective, complementing their faith-based education” (#79). This program seems to offer an additional qualification to that provided by religious institutions, but the work is not directly qualified as comprising religious activities. The VU Amsterdam goes one step further by letting its degree holders adopt a more direct religious role, albeit for non-religious employers: “Or you could go into education or take up a position as a spiritual advisor in a large

commercial or non-profit organization” (#70).

The text from the University of Waterloo website quoted above refers to religious professions (chaplain, pastor) and in addition to the jobs held by alumni the text directly refers to such professions: the study of religion\’s “Leads to careers such as teaching, chaplaincy, pastoral ministry, and counselling” (#64). The ministry is also given by five other universities as a career option for their graduates. While three cases are from the United States (University of Texas at Austin ##24/25; University of Miami #26; Duke University #97), the remaining ones, in addition to Canada (Waterloo), are from Sweden (Uppsala University #15) and Scotland (University of Glasgow #34); in the latter case, a specialist program is offered for those opting for that vocation.

Turning to specific careers besides those related to knowledge directly related to religion, becoming a school or high-school teacher is the option mentioned by most texts in the category—in total 13 cases, among these seven from Scandinavia and the remaining cases spread across the Europe, North America and the Pacific (University of Amsterdam, Glasgow, Waterloo, Miami, New England, Canterbury). Four cases, among them three from Europe, speak of education in general, without specifically mentioning work as a teacher (VU Amsterdam, Complutense University of Madrid, University of Lucerne, Duke University).

After teaching, academic work, i.e. doing research or working at a University, is listed most often (10 cases from eight universities across the world). This is followed by journalism (nine cases). Teacher, research/academics, and journalism are the three career options mentioned by far most often in our sample.

This top three-group is followed in frequency (four to six cases each) by a series of four occupations, where we can find some regional variation. In addition to the ministry (see above), five cases refer to the media (which, of course, covers a wide range of jobs). With one exception (The University of Canterbury #79), all these cases are from Europe. Culture, including work in a cultural

section, a council of cultural affairs, and as cultural advisor, totals four cases, which again are all from Europe. Work in a museum is also listed by four European texts. Law and medicine, on the other hand, are listed only by universities from the United States (with one exception, The University of New England #89, which also lists law).

Four cases, but from three universities (two from the USA, one from New Zealand), refer to social services; to this category one might possibly include the work in the social field mentioned by University Complutense of Madrid (#77). Also four cases (from three universities) refer to work with the government (two cases from the USA, one from the Netherlands). Related career options include the diplomatic/foreign service (three cases: one from the USA, one from Australia, one from Switzerland), public service (three cases with the same distribution by countries). Three European cases (University of Turku #9; University of Gothenburg #13; VU Amsterdam #70) regard the issue of societal integration (presumably of minority groups) as potentially offering career options to their graduates.

Counselling is listed by the University of Waterloo (#64), the University of New England (#89), and the University of Amsterdam (#69). The University of Amsterdam (#69), the University of Canterbury (#79), and the University of Berne (#92) present travel and tourism as offering career options to their graduates. The latter university also mentions work in libraries (three cases in total) and publishing (two cases).

Some additional 25 career options are given by two or one cases only (in addition to the spiritual advisor and some others mentioned above). Some of them are obviously more vague than others and some terms may have different shadings of meaning in different national context. They are here collated to form seven thematic clusters:

- defence, politics, public administration, public affairs, state
- development work, humanitarian organization, international organization, NGO's, peace corps

- discrimination, migration, minorities
- physician, public health
- artist, gallery director
- business, finance, human resources welfare, marketing, staff management
- communication, dissemination, information

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## Visual Representations of the Study of Religion \s

Most university websites have photos and pictures in addition to the textual material. Images tend to liven up text-heavy web pages and complement the themes communicated in the texts. Arguably, such images and photographs tell their own story of what the study of religion\s is. They are also crucial in ensuring the multi-medial experience that now seems to be expected on the web. Our sample for this discussion comprises 151 individual images downloaded from the web

pages([https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GLX3TDP\\_4hlZHRV Od2FaUDPMOdk8atOfKFvLCi1JFWg/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GLX3TDP_4hlZHRV Od2FaUDPMOdk8atOfKFvLCi1JFWg/edit?usp=sharing)) and 107<sup>29</sup> screenshots.<sup>30</sup> 17 of these do not have any images on them. 54, i.e. more than half, have one image (this also includes some visual collages, i.e. i.e. a combination of several images and graphic elements). 31 of the pages have between two and four images. The remaining five show between five and seven images.

From the 151 images two main categories can easily be identified: images related to (1) the subject 'religion' (86) and (2) to the educational context (41).

Images from the 'educational context'<sup>31</sup> category depict situations where students and scholars are engaged in a lecture, seminars or reading in libraries. Most of these images do not include any signifier for religion. Arguably, for prospective students these images portray what the study of religion\s practically appears like at the universities. In a sense they are objective representations of the study of religion\s as a social practice: people who discuss, read, and write. Even if some of the



images may originate from fieldwork, we see no scholars of religion in the field (engaged in participant observation), studying manuscripts or the like. This resonates with the absence of reflexive elements in the texts (as analyzed above).

There are 17 images of the various department and university buildings where the study of religion is located. Most (12) of these images are of a building in classical architectural style. In addition, there are eight pictures of staff-members, either as portraits or as group-photos.

**There is a strong tendency to represent religion as a force.**

How is religion presented in these images? Our analysis of the textual materials has brought to light that there is a strong tendency to represent religion as a force, having an impact on a range of other spheres. In addition to this 'claim of relevance', religion is conceptually related to psychology, identity, politics, ethics and existentialism. Moreover, the texts tend to present religion as a historical universal. Do the images reflect the same emphasis on relevance and universality?

34 of the total sample of 86 images related to religion depict material structures, mainly statues (25) and buildings (churches, mosques, stupas) (21). There are 26 occurrences of actual people in this category, 17 of these engaged in what seems to be a ritual context, evenly distributed between scenes from Christian and Hindu contexts, in addition to some few portraying Buddhists, Jews and Sikhs. (This selection seems to be rather evenly distributed across countries.) The overlap between material structures and people is surprisingly small; there are only eight occurrences where the two codes overlap, and since two of these occur in collages (#52-3; #101-2), only five pictures remain that depict people are set in either interaction or proximity with a religious structure (#16 [two pictures]; #46; #63; #97). It is obvious that the anthropological emphasis communicated by the texts is not supported by the images. Even if somebody must have built these material structures at some time, the images portray religion as historical monuments, things of the past, something static and fixed.

When taking a closer look at the images that portray people (26)

we find that more than half (17) show people in a ritual context.<sup>32</sup> We see Hindus and Buddhists performing puja (#63), Christians of both priesthood and laity praying (#16), Jews praying in front of the Western Wall (#97), and a Japanese crowd engaged in a Shinto festival (#16). The other half comprises without exception portraits and full-figure photos of people in some form of religious attire (#9; #52-3; #82). Despite the tendencies in the textual material to represent religion as a force in human lives, and as something with relevance to life's many aspects, this message is not transmitted by the selection of images.

Recall the main topics listed on the web pages. From the top of the list (politics, culture, ethics, history), only two can be said to be a recurring theme in the image material. We get a sense of history from the old buildings, statues and religious sites. If ethics is a regulation of behaviour, one could argue that it is implicitly visualized in images of rituals, but it does not occur in any more direct manner. In a broad sense, 'culture' is present in any photography. In the texts, religion is related to culture more in the sense of being present in 'other areas' of (a) culture.

Surprisingly, none of the images place religion or religious actors in such a setting, nor, for that matter, in contexts related to politics<sup>33</sup> or ethics. Even if these topics may be abstract constructions, it is not difficult to imagine how they could be visualised. As a matter of fact, the relationship between religion and politics appears visually in newspapers and news broadcasts on a daily basis. Religion is often embedded in public institutions and the places of everyday life be it images of Catholic saints on hospital walls, images of Mecca in kebab shops, pupils wearing religious symbols or the presence of Mormon pioneers in a busy city street. The examples are plenty and could be used to support the kind of claims made in texts.

There are no images that identifiably relate to the remaining terms in the topics section such as cognition, ecology, climate change, health, human rights, identity, immigration, law, media, post-colonialism, power, race, state, and terrorism, cinema and film, the economy, public life, word-views,

death/dying, mysticism, shamanism, violence, the interaction or interface of religion with other 'systems', globalization and gender.

Above (section RELIGIONS) we saw that there is especially one group of religions that are mentioned more than others. The same goes for the sample of pictures, but with a slightly different ranking: Christianity (26), Hinduism (16), Buddhism (11), Islam (9), Judaism (7).<sup>34</sup> These are clearly a representation of the commonly recognized 'world religions'. The rest of the pictures (16) comprise images relating to Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, New Age, Paganism, Shintoism and Confucianism, which may give the impression of some variety of religious traditions. Other prominent religions such as Mormonism, the Baha'i Faith, Jainism, Scientology, or the internal diversity within the 'world religions' are not represented.

There are several cases (11) where the images are presented in a collage. In some few cases (2) collages are used as part of the header on the page with the department logo. What all these have in common, is that they compile images from different religious traditions, from East and West. In a sense, this visualizes the plurality of religion\ and the global perspectives often claimed in the texts. Let us take a look at one example. On the website for Victoria University of Wellington we found the portraits of Virgin Mary, Krishna, John Lennon and former US president George W. Bush (retrieved 2011-23-03).



Figure 2, Collage on Victoria University of Wellington web page (March 23, 2011)

These portraits are arranged around the message "Never in the history of the world has the study of religion mattered more". Where Virgin Mary and Krishna are figureheads for Christianity (Catholicism) and Hinduism (Krishnaism) respectively, Lennon

and Bush appear as important persons in contemporary religious scenarios. Arguably, Bush and Lennon juxtapose American mainstream Protestantism, power and politics (Bush) and alternative spirituality (Lennon); note that Lennon is much more centrally situated in the composition (even though somewhat to the left), while Bush appears as right wing marginal figure. This is one of the very few visual representations found on a study of religion's web page that suggests that the discipline does not only deal with the prototypical religious histories, but also with modern politics and popular culture. Interestingly, as if to confirm our diagnosis this collage was subsequently replaced by a row of five pictures, out of which four are views from outside of religious buildings without the presence of any human beings (and correspondingly the textual message, which reflected the 'claim of relevance', has been taken out).<sup>35</sup>



Figure 3, Collage on Victoria University of Wellington web page (May 29, 2011)

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## Conclusion

**...a rather limited degree of intellectual coherence both with regard to selection of information and its content.**

For religion, most texts seeking to represent the study of religion's in our international sample of web pages flag its diversity, agency or impact; they mainly communicate a 'claim of relevance', probably serving as a kind of selling point. Key topics in the study of religion's highlighted by the texts are mainly politics, culture, ethics, and history. Methods are rarely mentioned on the web pages. Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism are the religions mentioned most often by far; implicitly, the discipline seems still dominated by a 'world religions' approach. In general, however, the meta-analysis of the state of the discipline according to its public self-presentation

on the university web pages point to a rather limited degree of intellectual coherence both with regard to selection of information and its content. Reflexive statements, i. e. statements that self-critically address the parameters of the study of religion\’s on a meta-level, are almost absent in our sample; the web pages show an alarmingly low degree of reflexivity. This is in striking contrast to vigorous debates that have characterized the field during recent decades. As we see it, this should be reflected more prominently on future web pages. This leads us to some observations and recommendations concerning best practice.

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## Recommendations

In light of what we have learned from this analysis, with all due caveat we want to end on a constructive note: How *should* the study of religion\’s be represented on university websites: what are the best practices? There are many ways to address this question. For example, plenty of good advice can be found in foras<sup>36</sup> about web content management, but that is beyond our scope in this article. Instead, we will restrict our observation to the main categories of our analysis. We do not claim to sit on the definitive solution to this challenge, but we hope to stimulate to greater attention being paid to how the study of religion\’s is represented on the web:

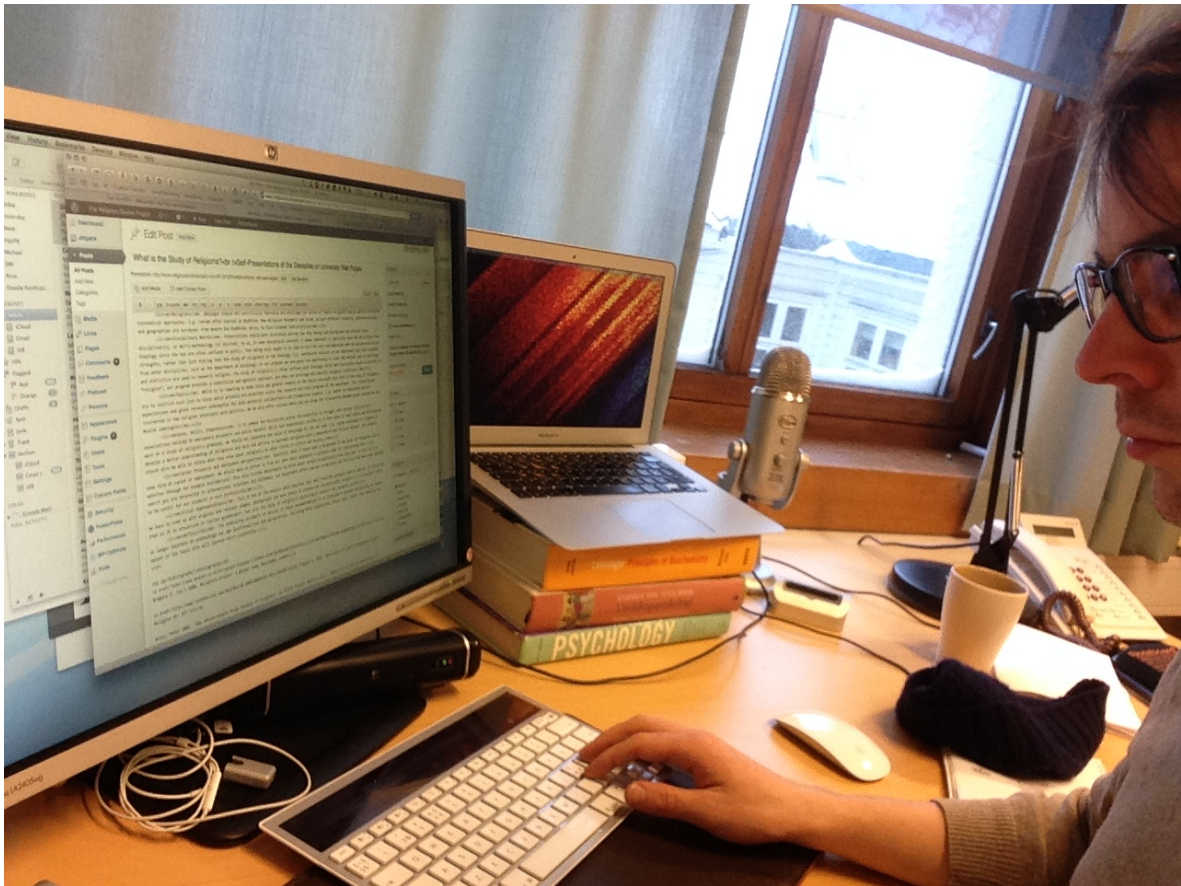
- *Designations.* While acknowledging the need for departmental identity and institutional history, it may be useful to flag a reference to a disciplinary umbrella, i. e. the study of religion\’s. It is also important to highlight association membership and point to other institutions where there is a close relationship. E. g. *The Department of Religious Studies belongs to the discipline of the study of religion\’s and is a member of the IAHR(<http://www.iahr.dk>). We have an exchange arrangement with the School of Divinity in Edinburgh.*
- *Religion.* Presentations should include a reflection on the

issue of defining the subject matter and the inherent problems of the concept. If there is a need for “claiming relevance”, efforts should be made to provide concrete (rather than general) examples where such relevance is achieved or to present this as a guiding hypothesis rather than as an ontological or historical truism. E.g. *As scholars of religion we feel obligated to always reflect on the question “What is religion?”. ‘Religion’ can be defined differently depending on whom you ask and where the question is posed. At our department we tend to teach and research religion as a global phenomenon that can be found in all societies with varying impact on culture and society: from the apocryphal Gospels’ influence on modern popular culture to the Goddess devotion in India.*

- *Religions.* Webpages should not uncritically reproduce and privilege the notion of “world-religions” and be aware of different taxonomical approaches. E.g. *We offer courses in Buddhism, New Religious Movements and Islam. In each different tradition, different periods and geographies are surveyed: from modern Zen Buddhism, Wicca, to East-European Sufi-practices.*
- *Disciplinary Matrix.* Presentations should more accurately portray how they deploy sub-disciplines and achieve inter-disciplinarity, or multi-methodology (if desired). To us, in some educational contexts it seems important to explicitly make the distinction from theology since the two are often confused in public. That being said, maybe it is time to turn the coin and emphasize what we may perceive as our strengths, rather than just stating that the study of religion is not theology. E.g. *Several scholars at our department work with scholars from other disciplines, such as the Department of Sociology. In our program you are given the opportunity to learn how methods such as philology and statistics are used to research religion. The study of religion is often confused with theology; while both disciplines share an interest in “religion”, our program provides a comparative and agnostic approach, and does not privilege any specific religious traditions.*

- *Topics.* While it is tempting to make lists and general remarks of the topics one might deal with in the study of religion\,s, try to restrict such list to those which actually are prominent within the research and study programs at the department. This creates proper expectations and gives relevant information for both potential collaborators and prospective students. E.g. *At our department we are interested in how religion intercepts with politics. We do also offer courses where you can study the relationship between gender discourses and Muslim ideologies.*
- *Aims, Skills, Competence.* It is common for disciplines within the humanities to struggle with certain (utilitarian?) expectations related to employment prospects and public benefit. While such expectations invites us to form ideas of what skills and abilities we want in a study of religion\,s graduate, we should not undermine the value of knowledge for its own sake. E.g. *We challenge our students to develop a better understanding of religion\,s and have the ability to approach religious with a comparative and critical mindset. Our students should also be able to relate what they know about religion\,s to other fields in culture and society.*
- *Career Prospects and employment perspectives.* Hopefully, most of those with a background in the study of religion\,s are in some form of career or employment. We should make an effort to find out what their education is actually used for, and portray this on the websites through for example testimonials. This also invites departments to think about certain occupational areas they want to focus on. E.g. *If you are interested in international relations and diplomacy, our Department offers courses in Religion and Politics that have been reported to be useful for our students in such professions.*
- *Visual Representations.* This is one of the aspects where websites (per 2011) have the greatest need to improve. It should not be hard to come up with original and relevant images, photographs and even videos to present and visualise both religion as it is studied (rather than as it is

visualized in tourist guidebooks), but also the study of religion\ as something consisting of scholars and students at work.



([http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/IMG\\_4244.jpg](http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/IMG_4244.jpg)) Knut at work

- *Reflexivity*. The underlying leitmotiv of several of these recommendations is to stimulate to greater reflexivity. We should no longer hesitate to acknowledge our own positionalities and perspectives, including their limitations; to our eyes, rather than limiting the appeal of the texts this will improve their credibility.

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## Appendix

- Simplified Codebook: Includes source texts, sample index etc: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AjmOTAPu4Qc4dGRtazFFdl9CTWtvTVpaTnNxY0plNEE&usp=sharing>
- Visual representations of the Study of Religion\s: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GLX3TDP\\_4hlZHRVod2FaUDPMOdk8atOfKFvLCi1JFWg/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GLX3TDP_4hlZHRVod2FaUDPMOdk8atOfKFvLCi1JFWg/edit)

- Editable Simplified Codebok (What is the Study of religion\s?): <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AjmOTAPu4Qc4dEhfTVItSFRnYzg4VjA3MGZGdGkyY2c&usp=sharing>

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## Notes

1. See Engler / Stausberg 2011 for the disciplinary status of the study of religion\s. As noted there, the idiosyncratic use of the backslash, which is followed here, is meant to index a series of theoretical and meta-theoretical questions regarding the referents and framing of 'religion' and 'religions'.
2. While the public understanding of science and technology has become a field of study in its own right (witness publications such as the journal *Public Understanding of Science*, published by SAGE since 1992), the public understanding of humanities and social sciences seems comparatively underdeveloped.
3. Information provided on faculty is not included because such pages typically do not make statements about their respective understandings of the discipline (and even if they do, this information is that of individuals and not of institutions) but mainly provide information on career, publications, fields of research and courses taught by the individual faculty member. Nor do we include information on single courses, partly because such courses can be offered even where there is no department or specialized staff available, partly because the boundaries are unclear (a course on Buddhism, for example, can be offered by study of religion\s departments, by South Asian area studies programs or by Indian languages departments), and partly in order not to inflate our sample.
4. See the appendix for a full index of the cases.
5. Our study combines strategies often referred to as

'qualitative' and 'quantitative' forms of analysis. In order to reflect the quantitative distribution of cases, in writing we tried, as much as possible, to stick to the following stylistic rule: when speaking of "few" cases we are referring to between two and five cases; when speaking of "some" cases, we are referring to between six and ten; "several" refers to between 11 and 20; "many" to between 21 and 60; "most" refers to 61 and more.

6. For reasons of space and relevance the following discussion does not include results of all coding exercises.
7. Consider the example of Leiden University (#68). The University has the Leiden Institute for Religious Studies (LIRS), which offers different master's programs, including a Master in Religious Studies. This program has seven tracks, including once called Comparative Religion. This program has several courses, including Comparative Religion: Themes and Topics in the Study of Religion, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, and a Required General Course Religious Studies. On different levels, Leiden University thereby uses no less than three designations (Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, Study of Religion).
8. E.g. the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion/La Société Canadienne pour l'Étude de la Religion, the Finnish Society for the Study of Religion, the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), and the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR).
9. In addition, a very small group of webpages extends the scope of the discipline to cover, e.g., "folk beliefs, worldviews, and ideologies" (University of Helsinki #12) or "the faiths, world views, practices, and ways of life that have, both historically and in the contemporary world, shaped the actions and allegiances of human beings" (Emory University #100).
10. Diversity: Aarhus University (#8); Philipps-Universität

Marburg (#47); LMU Munic (#51); Université Laval (#71); University of Zurich (#90). Diversity and complexity: University of Otago (81#); Victoria University of Wellington (#83); University of Zurich (#91). Diversity and universality: The University of New England (#88–89). Diversity and comparison: University of Washington (#30).

11. There are eight cases for universality or omnipresence of religion in our sample.
12. Religions “bring people together, but they also play a role in conflicts, and time after time they lead to public debate.” (University of Groningen #52); “In der spätmodernen Migrationsgesellschaft können Religionen das friedliche Zusammenleben ebenso erleichtern wie erschweren.” (University of Zurich #90).
13. See Antes (2002) for an attempt to identify “profit making strategies” (41) to promote the discipline. According to Antes the genuine contribution of the discipline is to “go on and concentrate on religion as a shaping force of culture and society, as an introduction to human variety in worldviews and as models for concord and discord among people.” This resonates with texts published on several homepages.
14. Examples for the classification as “humanities” come from New Zealand (Massey University # 80; Victoria University of Wellington #83) and Australia (University of New England #89). The University of Alabama speaks of “the anthropological approach to the study of religion as practiced in the public university” as being “a member of the human sciences (#27).
15. One wonders if that recalls the language of an integral humanism as proposed by Eliade.
16. Interdisciplinary: LMU Munich (#51); multidisciplinary: University of Ottawa (#72); transdisciplinary: University of Lausanne (#95: “L’histoire et les sciences des religions regroupent différentes disciplines qui se spécialisent dans l’étude scientifique des religions”).

17. Kulturwissenschaft is an umbrella term for which there is no real equivalent in any other language. In the German context, this term, which has replaced Geisteswissenschaften as a guiding notion, typically includes a range of disciplines or fields such as anthropology, ethnology, history, literary and media studies and sometimes also the social sciences. In the German speaking countries, claiming legitimate membership in this family of disciplines has been crucial for the study of religion\s as a platform of affirming its non-theological and post-phenomenological identity.
18. One can imagine that many theologians would regard this as a caricature of their business.
19. “Ces disciplines étudient les religions d’un point de vue non confessionnel, ‘extérieur’, et les envisagent comme un produit de l’activité culturelle humaine” (University of Lausanne #95).
20. When coding our sample for issues (aspects/topics) we ignored cases discussed in relation to definitional matters as well as the selection of religions/regions and methods discussed in other parts of this essay. Some themes are borderline cases. Consider Bible, philosophy, and theology. Since the Bible is an aspect of some religions rather than of religion\s in general, we ignored this here. Philosophy and theology can be aspects of religion\s insofar as many religions can be said to have their own philosophies or theologies (in which case they would be relevant for this section), but philosophy and theology can also refer to academic disciplines—and since the cases mentioning these words seem to refer to the latter meaning of these terms we ignored them here.
21. Even the much debated issue of fundamentalism is mentioned only once. Here are some other topics we found noteworthy: amulets, capitalism, clothing, holocaust, justice, museum, war.
22. The word cloud is created with Wordle (<http://wordle.net>,

retrieved 2012-11-30)

23. The third term in terms of frequency is 'to analyze' or 'analysis' (six cases). Somewhat less frequently used is the verb 'to interpret' or the adjective 'interpretive' (two cases each). Three texts speak of insight (twice as noun, once as verb). The verb 'to learn' occurs twice and so does the noun 'empathy'. Two texts speak of 'examining', whereas 'inquiry' and 'to comprehend' only occur once each. Also words referring to explanation and theory are mentioned only once each (in both cases in the verbal form).
24. "Proporcionar un conocimiento racional y crítico del hecho religioso y de la evolución de las diferentes religiones" (Complutense University of Madrid #77). The text continues by referring to instruments of analysis and critique.
25. "En plus de permettre le développement d'une culture religieuse générale (les approches générales du fait religieux ou les grandes traditions religieuses à travers le monde), les cours favorisent l'évolution d'un sens critique, tant à l'égard de sa propre expérience qu'à celui des phénomènes religieux et spirituels" (Université Laval #71).
26. The capability of analysis or to analyze is the skill mentioned by most cases (9), followed by understanding/to understand (5) and the ability to interpret (4). Insight is mentioned as a skill in three cases. Three cases engage speak of 'reflection'. Among the cognitive skills mentioned by one or two cases we find 'to compare', 'to describe', 'to examine', 'to explain' and 'to explore'.
27. "I kombinasjon med støttefaget får du kunnskap om forholdet mellom religion og samfunn og en unik tverrkulturell kompetanse" (University of Bergen #1). "Du får kunnskap om forholdet mellom religion og samfunn og en unik tverrkulturell kompetanse" (University of Oslo #3).
28. The notion of 'employability' has achieved worldwide resonance in higher education; for its implications, limitations, relevance, and career in Western Europe with

regard to the study of religion\ see Alles 2011;  
Engler/Stausberg 2001; Stausberg 2011.

29. Observant readers may note that this sample is slightly larger than the sample of texts (consisting of 101 web pages). The reason for this is that some websites randomize between a set of images on their site everytime you access the page in a web browser.
30. Unfortunately, we failed to take screenshots in the first phase of data collection, but did so only some months later (on May 29, 2011). In the meanwhile, of course, some web pages had changed their appearance, not the least their visual content. We still think that our findings are relevant and valid.
31. Images of cheerful students enjoying lively discussions are probably merely 'stock photos' indiscriminately used for whichever department sites. One exception is the University of Bayreuth where actual photos from the department's students are used.
32. Note that the images appear to keep on changing rather quickly. Several of the images mentioned in the following can in the meanwhile no longer be seen on the web pages.
33. There is one notable exception, where the profile of president George W. Bush is used in a collage (see below).
34. In the texts Islam and Hinduism are mentioned more often.
35. <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sacr/about/overview-intros/religious-studies.aspx> (retrieved 2011-06-27)
36. The online magazine *A List Apart* is a good place to start learning more on writing for the web (<http://www.alistapart.com/topics/content/writing/> [Retrieved: 03.01.13])