

Career View

Issue No 25 • October 2002

Religious Studies - a degree for our times?

The majority of human beings on this planet believe in God. Some believe in many gods and/or goddesses. What is most important about these beliefs is that they create extremely powerful motivations. Religions impel people to make war and peace, to kill and heal, to exclude and love, and to be inspired to produce literary, artistic and musical works of great beauty. Religion can drive families and nations apart, and bring strangers and enemies together.

Arguably the deepest and most enduring of all human passions is religious passion. Why do we develop these passions? How are they important in contemporary world affairs, especially in such political hotspots as the Middle East, South Asia, the United States, and Northern Ireland? How are religious ideals and values altering the social and political landscape in New Zealand? What are the religious traditions and values of the native peoples in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands? Does religion provide resources for combating long standing social inequalities and the environmental degradation that is threatening our planet? How do religious values inform the arts, music, and culture? How have religions influenced world history and the rise of western and non-western civilizations and political economies? How is religion covered in the media? Is modern democratic secularism a kind of religion? How do the world's great religious traditions relate to contemporary and popular spirituality?

Students of religion ask these and related questions of the world around us. They inquire into the passions, ideals, and values that stand at the core of many human societies, that impinge

on our own, and will decisively shape the social, political and environmental landscape in the upcoming decades.

The advantage of Religious Studies

A degree in Religious Studies focuses on issues that involve values, ethics, power and morality, and their institutional and individual expression around the world. Some jobs, for example, policy adviser, require balancing such value-laden considerations. On a larger scale, issues like genetic engineering tend to be argued out according to the values and beliefs of different individuals and interest groups, all of whom think they are right. In the midst of such dilemmas, Religious Studies graduates have an advantage. They are trained to grapple with the problems of colliding belief systems, and are wise to the ways in which conflict and good intentions can serve the interests of powerful institutions. In particular, Religious Studies teaches the critical evaluation of competing claims and methods of resolving these. Stimulating argument is a key characteristic of Religious Studies papers and graduates typically describe their study experience as enjoyable, as well as intellectually and personally challenging.

Topical coverage of career related issues brought to you by Victoria University Career Development and Employment.

Areas covered include how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities, to life/work planning, graduate destination information and current issues or material relevant to the employment scene.

Your comments and suggestions always welcomed.

What skills do Religious Studies graduates have and how do these skills fit into the job market?

The following is a breakdown of some of the core competencies Religious Studies graduates possess, and some job areas they could be applied to.

This is not a definitive list, either of the competencies or their associated work environments. Nor are the competencies limited to the types of jobs or organisations suggested. In some cases additional qualifications or experience may be required. However many skills and competencies are transferable to almost any work environment, and, in the current competitive job market, those that are broad-based and travel well are usually the most valuable.

Analytical and Strategic Thinking Skills

Religious Studies graduates have the ability to:

- **Research:** find relevant information quickly and summarise large amounts of data clearly and effectively.
- **Exercise critical judgement:** the ability to prioritise and assign value to different aspects of a situation. It is the basis of effective decision-making and underlies the process of consensus.
- **Work with abstract conceptual structures:** this is useful when dealing with bureaucracies or entities like 'the community' or 'the environment', which tend to be multi-dimensional in character and widely open to interpretation.
- **Set up a strategy for making decisions:** this is particularly valuable in the context of an ambiguous situation or one where information is inconsistent or insufficient.

Work environments for these skills include:

- Government agencies which emphasise policy advice to select committees and ministers, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Ministry for Social Development, Department of Labour, Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry for the Environment.

- Agencies with statutory responsibilities and/or the power of authorisation. Includes government departments such as New Zealand Immigration Service, Department of Internal Affairs, Department of Corrections, Serious Fraud Office, and the Office of Film and Literature Classification. Also local authorities such as City and Regional Councils.
- All areas of management and some levels of administration. Experience requirements and levels of responsibility vary enormously from job to job. Sometimes an administrative role may lead to a management position. Experience in financial monitoring is usually necessary for management roles.
- Journalism and the media. Involves reporting and covering news stories that relate to religious ideas, practices and values, both in New Zealand and in international affairs.
- Law and other professional roles. A law, or other professional degree, would also be required.

Job titles include:

Policy analyst or adviser
Government researcher
Management trainee
Administrative assistant
Probation officer
Citizenship processing support officer
Complaints officer
Programme administrator
Information adviser
Negotiator
Classifications officer
Project manager

Leadership Skills

Religious Studies graduates have the ability to:

- **Formulate an effective response** in situations where there are no right or wrong answers. Many work situations do not have clearly defined boundaries or come with directions on what to do next. Showing initiative in ambiguous situations is generally advantageous.
- **Understand the power of moral authority.** Knowing when a particular course of action must be followed simply because it is the

right thing to do, can be a very powerful attribute to bring to a situation, particularly when issues of accountability are involved.

- **Understand the impact of conflicting ideologies.** Ideological commitments often involve interconnecting sets of values and clusters of belief. Those able to explore issues without invalidating the beliefs of either party are in a strong position to build relationships based on trust. Those who are trusted are able to act as an intermediary should negotiations become tricky.

Work environments for these skills include:

- Not-for-profit organisations. These comprise a range of organisations that, in general, focus on providing social services to the community. They implement education and practical support programmes, liaise with government departments and other funding bodies, and increasingly seek to build relationships with the business sector.
- Most paid positions are in the administrative structure or in training, counselling or education roles. Voluntary work can provide valuable experience.
- Organisations include: New Zealand Red Cross, Relationship Services, Rape Crisis, the Richmond Fellowship, Home and Family Society, Barnados, World Vision and Save the Children NZ.
- Church based organisations include: Presbyterian Support, Anglican Care - Social Services, Catholic Social Services, and the Salvation Army. Often people are affiliated with the denomination of the church they work for.

Job titles include:

Care worker
International aid advisor
National adviser
Volunteer co-ordinator
Charity policy analyst
Communications and membership manager
Trainer and facilitator
Counsellor
Community support worker
Fundraiser
International care worker
Area co-ordinator

Problem Solving Skills

Religious Studies graduates have the ability to:

- **Develop strategies to resolve conflict.** This is valuable at the level of individuals but may also be extended to larger issues where the parties in conflict are groups or organisations and the issues are consequently more complex.
- **Present an argument to a group and persuade others of its conclusions.** Most work environments are hungry for good ideas, and these innovative ideas need to be expressed clearly and forcefully.
- **Understand both sides and negotiate resolutions.** Being able to take up an opposing point of view can reveal weaknesses in a strategy or situation that would not have come to light if everyone were in agreement. This can be a form of lateral thinking and is linked to innovation and finding imaginative solutions to sticky problems.

Work environments for these skills include:

- Educational institutions. Includes Primary, Secondary and Tertiary as well as Language Schools and community-based Training Providers. Research skills can be critical, particularly for university positions.
- Media. Includes print journalism (newspapers and magazines), film, video and television production companies, radio and television journalism, and publishing.
- Public Relations, Advertising and Marketing companies. May also require statistical skills and quantitative data analysis.
- Unions. Industry experience and/or a legal background are useful.
- Conservation Projects: including the Department of Conservation, and private environmental groups.

Job titles include:

Mediator
Professional development consultant
Account executive
Student services adviser
Union organiser

Management consultant
 Teacher
 University lecturer
 Marketing trainee
 Journalist
 Editor
 Conservationist

Relationship Management Skills

Religious Studies graduates have the ability to:

- **Empathise with the belief systems of other people and different cultural groups.** Many jobs stress sensitivity to cultural or ethnic diversity and in such circumstances religious diversity is also a possibility. This quality can be particularly relevant when adjusting to work environments overseas.
- **Understand the dynamics of social justice and equity.** The principles of social justice and equity underpin, and legitimise, many policy decisions. The idea of 'fairness' also runs through work situations at both a management and a personal level. Those who are seen as fair in their dealings are more likely to elicit co-operation from others and therefore function more effectively, whatever their work environment.
- **Separate ethics from expedience.** Actions and decisions taken from an ethical position can generally be justified and are less likely to suffer from the problem of unintended consequences. Being able to resist the temptation of a 'quick fix' solution in favour of the 'right' one tends to demonstrate reasoned judgement.

Work environments for these skills include:

- Government Departments that have strong community interaction. Includes the Department of Conservation, Race Relations Office, Office of Human Rights Proceedings, Human Rights Commission, NZ Police, and the Health and Disability Commissioner.
- Businesses that operate on high levels of public trust. Includes real estate agencies, insurance companies, banks, human resource consultants, and investment consultants.

- Health care services. Includes District Health Boards and public hospitals, Accident Compensation Corporation, Plunket Society, Cancer Society, and the Arthritis Foundation. Generally administrative roles.
- Volunteer work in, for example, Restorative Justice groups and Victim Support. Mediation training could be useful.

Job titles include:

Counsellor
 Recruitment consultant
 Community relations programme manager
 Real estate consultant
 Claims investigator
 Financial adviser
 Community outreach worker
 Customer support adviser
 Complaints resolution officer
 Investigation officer

People Skills

Religious Studies graduates have the ability to:

- **Understand the motivational power of belief, including self-belief.** Motivation is one of the key elements in satisfactory work performance, and is a prime therapeutic dynamic in many forms of healing and rehabilitation. Those who can work with this awareness will have an advantage in most work situations.
- **Appreciate the significance of spiritual experience.** People express spiritual need in many situations, both religious and secular. Apart from organised religious groups, there is also a large 'spirituality' industry, which reaches into publishing, retailing and marketing, education and journalism sectors. Sensitivity to people's spiritual needs is necessary in order to be effective or productive in these areas.
- **Understand the expression of spiritual and moral values in the wider community,** particularly in multi-cultural societies. Whether or not they are affiliated with an organised church, community groups can be powerful agencies for social change. Those who can balance the religious, political and pragmatic requirements of these organisations can work very effectively in the context of community values.

Work environments for these skills include:

- Religious Institutions. The process that leads to ordination as a minister of religion varies from denomination to denomination. Generally a tertiary qualification is preferred, together with deep involvement in the teachings of the faith and its community.
- Support agencies and private counselling services. Includes community mental health facilities, Employee Assistance Programme, Refugee and Migrant Service, hospices, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.

Job titles include:

Teacher
 Psychologist
 Social worker
 Rehabilitation officer
 Spirituality counsellor
 Hospice worker
 Political party worker

Generic Graduate Skills

Religious Studies graduates also possess a range of generic graduate skills that include:

- Intellectual curiosity
- Research and information gathering skills
- The ability to work under pressure and to meet deadlines
- The desire to achieve
- Mental flexibility
- Organisational ability
- Well-developed written and verbal communication skills
- The ability to set realistic goals.

Recent graduate destination surveys report

Religious Studies graduates were employed in positions which include, but were not limited to: Journalist, Government Researcher, Tertiary Lecturer, Research Officer, Primary Teacher, Records Project Manager, Library Assistant, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Homeopath, Conservationist, Novelist, Assistant Manager, Management Consultant, DJ.

Graduate profiles

Nigel Bond

*Research Analyst,
 Queensland Rural
 Medical Support Agency*



I have always had an interest in human behaviour and religious beliefs, and this was further developed through personal travel and experiences with various cultures previously unfamiliar to me. Therefore, after working several years in a job that I no longer enjoyed, I decided to undertake further study to pursue this interest. I was already trained in applied science and initially enrolled in psychology, taking Religious Studies as an interest paper. But I enjoyed it so much that it ended up becoming the focus of my undergraduate degree, the motivation for me to complete Honours, and the topic of my Masters thesis.

I particularly enjoyed the fact that I was able to learn about a wide range of religious traditions and to thoroughly explore the significance of these. Indeed, transforming the Religious Studies tutorial room into an Ancient Egyptian tomb for a performance on myth interpretation, was one of the more unusual course assessments that I have ever undertaken. I also enjoyed the opportunity to gain insight into the impact that religious beliefs have on individual lives, in particular working with North African refugees as part of my Masters thesis.

Of the many skills that I gained during my training in Religious Studies, I believe that the ability to think critically has benefited me the most. After completing my Masters degree I was employed as a research analyst for the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs. I am currently employed by an Australian organisation responsible for the recruitment, placement and well-being of medical professionals located in

rural and remote areas of Queensland. My training in Religious Studies has provided me with the practical skills to undertake fieldwork in a wide range of settings and cultural environments, including engaging with Indigenous and minority groups. It has also given me the knowledge and insight to critically analyse and report the results of research undertaken in these contexts. The importance of religion in people's lives, and on their behaviours, is increasingly being recognised by government and other agencies as extending well beyond the spiritual context. Indeed, it is now taken as an important consideration in the development of policy regarding social health and well-being.

Not only has my degree in Religious Studies opened doors professionally, it has allowed me increased opportunities to engage with, and gain insight from, the very communities that originally sparked my interest in the subject.

Chloë Laing

*Administrator,
Screen Innovation
Production Fund,
Creative New Zealand*

When I first mentioned to people that I was taking Religious Studies at university, a consistent response was, 'Oh, are you religious?' I would hesitate to answer such a question, as I did not see that this bore any significance to my interest in taking the course. I come from a relatively secular background and the concept of religion has always fascinated me. I thought that Religious Studies would teach me about the various religions that exist in the world and the cultures that practice them. On one level this is what I did learn, but there was also a whole new level of thinking and understanding that was opened up to me.



Religion in its many forms is an indelible part of every culture and everyone has their own views of religious beliefs, values and practices. I found that through the course of my study my own beliefs and ways of thinking were challenged, encouraging me to think more carefully and critically about what I had to say. The importance of listening to and appreciating the views of others was also emphasised, as through good communication and well-articulated ideas, plus a healthy dose of conflict, comes interesting and progressive discussion. These are essential skills, which encourage clear communication and critical thinking. They can be applied to many different contexts and do not solely belong to the domain of Religious Studies.

My final Religious Studies paper concerned the interpretation of myth and narrative, and my final essay explored the filmic interpretation of an iconic religious story. I was excited that I was able to explore the theories of religious myth and narrative through film. This illustrates the flexibility and depth of Religious Studies, which also involves the study of such areas as history, anthropology, politics, literature, film and philosophy. These and many other areas are inextricably linked with the study of religion. I was not aware of how far these links extended when I began studying religion and it was fascinating to see the connections unfold, and thus to gain a broader understanding of cultural, religious and artistic contexts. To gain a more thorough understanding of methods of interpretation, belief systems and the way in which religion is present in the world has been invaluable to me on both a personal and a professional level.

The job I am currently in is a position in an arts organisation, requiring a person with a broad understanding of arts and culture. The knowledge and skills I gained thorough Religious Studies have significantly assisted me in this position, especially in the areas of communication, interpretation and critical thinking. One of the most important things that

I learnt through Religious Studies is to be open-minded and think beyond the factual and the obvious, to be aware of possibilities not so instantly apparent.

Heather Lazrus

*PhD Student, Environmental Anthropology
University of Washington*

When I initially decided to take the first year foundation courses in Religious Studies I was not intending on majoring in the discipline. Long before the first semester was over, however, I was hooked. Some combination of the charisma of the professors and the fascinating subject matter had me set on pursuing more knowledge of this aspect of the human world. I found that my classes in Religious Studies offered the opportunity to explore a different facet of the human world than my other university papers. It seems immensely important to me as a student to have at least a basic understanding of the fundamental beliefs which underlie so much of people's actions around the globe. Whether your interest is in a specific religious system, area or population, or if you want to be trained to be able to think about religion critically, Religious Studies classes at Victoria may be some of the most important in your university career.

Personally, the most important aspect of the Religious Studies Department is its wide variety of expertise. The most influential and inspiring classes I took were not about a religion, but about the interface between religion and some other social phenomenon such as environmentalism and terrorism. Courses which approached religious practices surrounding a common human experience, such as death, were invaluable in that they cut across belief systems and geographic areas and encouraged you as a student to think about issues from your own experiences.

The most important skills I gained from my degree in Religious Studies are an appreciation of critical analysis and an understanding that there are possibly never absolutes in the study of

belief. These realisations are invaluable in my present graduate studies. They have changed the way I process academic readings as well as the news. Religious Studies courses lend a valuable perspective to many social, political and economic dynamics in the world - past and present.

The most fundamental things you acquire from Religious Studies classes may not actually be a list of facts: what is sacred to what religion, who practices it, and where and when they do so. While the facts may be fascinating, even more valuable might simply be the different perspectives you are exposed to in different classes and the new ways of thinking which Religious Studies encourages.

Michael Mawson

*Researcher/Writer/Facilitator,
Social Justice Commission, Anglican Church*

Doing Religious Studies was mostly an accident. I intended to study philosophy and history but I started picking a few Religious Studies papers up on the side, and it wasn't until third year that I realised that I had virtually completed a major. Now I have recently completed an MA in Religious Studies, a qualification that has even more recently secured me a job as a researcher/writer/facilitator for the Social Justice Commission of the Anglican Church. This job involves setting up and running projects to raise consciousness around various issues of injustice and oppression (whether economically or socially), which is not far off my ideal job.

So how has my study equipped me for pursuing and securing the work that I wanted?

First of all I allowed my programme of study to be dictated by my interests. Structuring my programme around existing interests, and deepening these, gave me a greater chance of excellence. It is far easier to find motivation and creativity for courses that are an end in themselves, rather than just a means to a qualification. Also, focusing on my interests meant skills such as writing, reading and

researching developed more naturally.

So why specifically Religious Studies? Even within a largely secular society such as New Zealand, religion, both through its past role in setting up the historical conditions within which we now live and through its continuing impact within the global scene, plays a vital role in who we are and how we live. If we are to understand who we are, whether on a personal, communal or global scale, then the study of things that have

traditionally been termed religious will prove vital. Whether this is pursued through studying the mystical aspects of the local rave-scene, or how traditional Christian theology justifies a particular relationship to native forests, the world can not be understood apart from its religious dimensions. Engaging with such issues has helped me to think about who I am, and how I wish to relate to the world through my work, and through my life.

Religious Studies at Victoria

A full range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses are offered exploring a variety of different systems of religious belief and practice.

Literary, legal, musical, philosophical, political and cultural traditions are shaped by religious traditions, and religion continues to play a central role in our contemporary global world. 100-level papers are designed to introduce students to the major religious traditions of the world, and topics that focus on the interaction of religion with other areas of human activity and interest. Courses explore: the religious traditions of the West (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam); the religious traditions of Asia (India, China, Tibet and Japan); the relationships between religion, law and politics; the myths and rituals of tribal peoples and their religions; and religious experience.

The 200-level papers allow students to deepen their study of particular religious traditions and

to become familiar with some of the major methodological approaches to the study of religion (psychology of religion, politics of religion).

300-level papers address a number of themes comparatively, including religion and the environment; religion and sex; new age spirituality; death, dying and religion; terrorism and religious violence; religion and healing; mysticism; pilgrimage; the future of religion; cultural religious relativism and pluralism.

In addition to papers offered in trimesters 1 and 2 a Summer Trimester programme is also offered.

To major in Religious Studies it is necessary to complete six Religious Studies papers, including at least two at the second or 200-level and two from the third or 300-level. Many of our students jointly major with another subject, for example, politics, psychology, history, or philosophy.

Special thanks to:

The School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies, in particular A/Prof Jenny Harper - Head of School, Aliko Kalliabetos - Religious Studies Department; Nigel Bond, Chloe Laing, Mike Mawson, Heather Lazrus and all those people who contributed to this publication.

Career View is published by Career Development and Employment

Victoria University of Wellington, Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui
PO Box 600, Wellington, Tel: 64-4-463 5390 or 64-4-463 5393, Fax: 64-4-463 5234

www.vuw.ac.nz/st_services/careers/

October 2002

ISSN 1172-4315