

## RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The majority of people have a religion or faith. Globally, religion continues to play a central role in contemporary politics, law, society and culture. The fault lines within and between communities are so often expressed in religious terms as societies become more diverse. While humanity moves further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and people increasingly interact with each other, knowledge of religions will provide understandings that are essential for us to live peacefully together. Religious Studies is essential as part of an education for our times.

### WHY IS RELIGION IMPORTANT?

Religion creates communities, actual and imagined, and harnesses powerful motivations, both individual and communal. Religions impel people to go to war and to strive for peace; to kill and to heal; to hate and to love; to include and exclude; to understand family and communal life in specific ways; and to produce sublime literary, artistic and musical works.

Religious Studies seeks to ask and answer many questions that have historical, political, social, psychological, economic and spiritual significance. For example, how important is religion in current national, international and regional relations? Are the conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia, Ireland or the U.S. primarily religious? What role does religion play in a changing New Zealand? What are the religious traditions and values of indigenous peoples in New Zealand and across the Pacific? Does religion provide resources for combating social and economic inequalities and environmental degradation, or does it promote the status quo? How have religions influenced history and the development of civilisations? Do they continue to do so? If so, how? What are the relationships between religious traditions and popular spirituality? Are the numbers of adherents to religions increasing or declining? What is “religious fundamentalism”, and why is it growing? How are we managing increasing religious diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand? What are the impacts of increasing religious diversity in New Zealand, at the local and national levels, on our education, health, legal and justice policies, and on the New Zealand workplace?



### WHY STUDY RELIGIONS?

Religious Studies is an interdisciplinary subject drawing on perspectives and approaches from sociology, history, anthropology, psychology and law. It is not theology, in the sense of training for the clergy or deepening formation within a faith, but a subject within the scope of Humanities and Social Sciences. It seeks to explain why people believe what they do, and why they do what they

Career View explores how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities and to life/work planning. It includes graduate destination information and current employment issues. Your comments and suggestions are always welcomed.

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do. Religious Studies courses may look at: religious and cultural diversity; religion in the world today; rituals and myths; religion and politics; religion and neuroscience; religion and nationalism; contemporary spirituality; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist traditions; or at religion in New Zealand and the Pacific, South Asia, East Asia and in the Middle East.

Religious Studies engages with the real world and its immediate concerns and considers these from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Academic training in Religious Studies gives students the ability to understand complex values, ethics and moralities, and the beliefs of diverse communities. As our societies become more religiously and culturally diverse, expertise in such diversities comes into its own as a preparation for today's world and workplaces where difference is increasingly an everyday issue. Religious Studies students also develop specialist knowledge of conflict and competing claims, and how to resolve these issues. Students are equipped to understand national and global geopolitical realities, and how religion intersects with politics, society and culture. Religious Studies entails grasping the nature of many different arguments and justifications. Students report that their study of religion is intellectually and personally challenging and equips them for the contemporary global world.

"If I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion because that's how integrated religion is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today."  
John Kerry Secretary of State (August 2014)

## WHAT SKILLS DO RELIGIOUS STUDIES GRADUATES DEVELOP?

The skills and aptitudes gained in completing a degree in Religious Studies equip graduates for a range of occupations. Graduates also possess a range of generic graduate skills including: intellectual curiosity, mental flexibility, ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines, organisational ability, the ability to set realistic goals and the desire to achieve.

### Problem solving

Religious Studies graduates are able to develop strategies to resolve conflict both at an individual level, and also in relation to larger issues where the parties in conflict are groups or organisations and the issues are more complex. Graduates can also understand both sides of an issue 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 kind of lateral thinking is linked to innovation and finding imaginative solutions to difficult problems.

### Analytical, strategic thinking and conceptual skills

Students become skilled in analysis through engagement with key theories and real world problems and examples. Using different conceptual frameworks, they think in the abstract and analyse and interpret the form and content of information. In writing an argument to support their views, students also learn to critically evaluate and edit their own work.

### Communication, relationship management and people skills

The ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally with empathy, respect and understanding is honed through degree studies that focus primarily on people and their religious beliefs. Graduates can also present an argument to a group and persuade others of its conclusions. Undergraduate and postgraduate study enhances students' ability to read and write well, and to understand and communicate complex ideas and information through written work and oral presentations.

### Creativity

The ability to make connections and arrive at insights and judgments is part of the creative process of research and problem solving. Most work environments are hungry for good ideas. Through assignment and project work, graduates formulate new questions and hypotheses, create potential solutions and apply theory in original ways.

### Multidisciplinary approach

As students examine local and global religious issues, they develop the ability to see the big picture and the connections between the many different aspects of human beliefs, values, ethics and moralities. Religious Studies brings together knowledge from many other disciplines. A multidisciplinary approach gives students insights into other fields and experience in combining different knowledge systems, information and perspectives. This ability is vital when addressing complex problems of human societies living in a globally networked world. Graduates also develop potential for working with different people from a range of backgrounds, cultural and societal settings.

### Research and information gathering skills

Students of Religious Studies can find relevant information quickly and summarise large amounts of data clearly and effectively. They do extensive research using a variety of approaches, and also critique the different approaches to research, as well as their own role in the process.



Development Studies, Political Science, International Relations, Social Policy and Management.

Careers may include:  
public sector research and policy analysis;  
NGO and humanitarian work; advocacy/lobbying;  
education and development programme planning and/or implementation; managing volunteers; local and international journalism; immigration and refugee services; travel and tourism work; cross-cultural relations consultancy; public relations and communications;  
international development; public health; community work;

youth work; teaching English as a second language;  
local government advisory work.

### Leadership skills

Graduates “walk the talk” and act as role models. Their studies in religion expose them to a wide variety of effective leadership models. They demonstrate understanding and model ways of approaching challenging issues, whether they are religious, cultural, political, social or personal.

### Non-judgemental attitude

Religious Studies fosters an attitude of enquiry and openness to diversity, challenging students to question their assumptions and attitudes and to keep a curious and open mind throughout their studies and working life. The ability to suspend judgement based on one's own belief system is crucial when trying to understand the differing beliefs of others. The capacity to be mindful of self and others is of value where peoples of varied cultures and beliefs work and live together, where there may be conflict and the need to understand one another.

## WHERE DO RELIGIOUS STUDIES GRADUATES WORK?

Graduate destination surveys show that Religious Studies graduates work in a wide range of organisations both public and private, including central and local government, educational institutions, newspapers and radio, community and church-based organisations, management consultancy and conservation. Many roles are suitable for new graduates, and Religious Studies can give job applicants a unique edge. Religious Studies graduates tend to be attracted to careers that involve social justice and values-based analysis of social issues. Religious Studies is an excellent major to combine with a range of subjects such as Law, Sociology,

### Public Sector

Government departments, ministries and government agencies employ graduates to entry-level positions such as policy analyst, policy adviser, ministerial writer, communications officer/adviser, researcher and research assistant. Some ministries have graduate development programmes, depending on their recruitment needs and the economic climate. The Ministries of Social Development (MSD), Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) and Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) are large ministries that need graduates with excellent generic skills. When recruiting new graduates for entry-level foreign policy and international development roles, MFAT states, “Applicants will be recent graduates who may also have some work experience. You must have excellent academic records and have either an honours degree, postgraduate degree in any discipline or a conjoint degree that includes economics, law or science. At the same time you must be able to demonstrate a high level of emotional intelligence along with outstanding analytical ability.”

### Local Government

The purpose of local government is to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities, now and for the future. Councils and district councils manage a very wide range of services for the community that include housing, disability, sport and recreation, urban planning and community centres. Graduates with special interests





### Church Organisations

Large church organisations employ parish staff including ordained ministers, clerks, administrators and volunteer coordinators. They also employ people to manage and operate social support services such as food banks, budget advice, housing, youth programmes, counselling services, employment readiness programmes, advocacy, and the writing and editing of informational and publicity material. Working with youth is a growing area in many churches and may not necessarily require a social work degree; other positions working with people in need

may require social work experience and qualifications.

### Trans-Governmental Organisations

Graduates may find roles with United Nations agencies such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UN Women and World Health Organisation. There are many fields of work under the UN umbrella including peace and security, development, human rights, humanitarian affairs and international law. While another major or degree may be required, the understanding gained through Religious Studies is a distinct advantage when working with issues and people across different cultures and faiths.

### Education Sector

Teaching at university level usually requires a PhD. Graduates can advance their research and teaching skills by undertaking a Master's degree or PhD, and may have the opportunity to tutor undergraduate students. Other roles in tertiary institutions include academic advisers, programme managers, career consultants, trainers or administrators. With additional teaching qualifications, possibilities open up in primary or secondary teaching. Further career options include educational research and policy work.

### Journalism and Media

Graduates intending to work as permanent editorial staff (reporters, sub-editors, editors) in the media (print, radio, television, the internet) usually require a journalism qualification. It is possible to write freelance for niche publications without an industry qualification. In-depth understanding of world religions and associated issues is extremely useful for journalists reporting on related current affairs.

and humanitarian values may find employment in community development and work to promote social well-being in such roles as strategic adviser, community adviser and social resilience adviser. In this type of work it is useful to have skills developed during degree studies, diverse life experience and a proven interest in communities, through volunteering or paid work.

### Non-Governmental Organisations, NGOs

NGOs are not-for-profit groups organised on a local, national or international level. NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions. Some are organised around specific issues such as human rights, environment or health. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. NGOs are diverse. Some are connected with international organisations such as Red Cross, Oxfam, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Save the Children and World Vision. New Zealand NGOs such as Presbyterian Support Services, Anglican Care, Salvation Army and Barnardos, provide services to people in need and to specific groups in the population such as children, elderly and families. They may do research on improving service provision and good practice in relation to their clientele in particular regions. The staff of New Zealand NGOs is often small and the ability to be versatile is important. Work may involve research, surveys, advocacy, fund raising, giving policy advice to government, designing and/or running programmes and events, communications, publicity and general administration. Other New Zealand NGOs include City Missions, The Peace Foundation, Global Volunteer Network, Volunteering New Zealand and Refugee Services Aotearoa New Zealand.

## GRADUATE PROFILES

### Public Relations, Communications, Marketing

Organisations need to establish a distinctive profile, and maintain goodwill and understanding with the public and other stakeholders. This requires excellent written and verbal communication and interpersonal skills, and skills in using social media. Industry-specific qualifications are an advantage. Public Relations seeks to manage public opinion by transmitting positive information to those the organisation wants to influence. The related function of Communications is responsible for promoting an organisation's image and reputation to the public, as well as informing staff and clients about what is happening within the organisation. This may involve writing web content for intranet or public websites as well as material for pamphlets, articles, annual reports, media releases and so on. At higher levels, there may be advisers on communications policy and strategy. Some entry-level positions, such as communications officer, may require additional qualifications in media studies or journalism.

### JOB TITLES

Following is a list of sample job titles reported in graduate employment destination surveys. Some roles may require additional qualifications or experience.

Advocate • communications and marketing assistant • communications officer • community adviser • cultural adviser • development officer • education/information officer • events coordinator • fundraising assistant • human resources adviser • immigration adviser • journalist • lecturer • marketing assistant/manager • media support officer • policy assistant/adviser • policy analyst • programme assistant • researcher • school teacher • social policy adviser • strategic adviser (local government) • tutor • writer



### Anushka Perinpanayagam

Contractor



I decided to study Religious Studies in my last year of secondary school. Being from a Sri Lankan background, I was exposed to lots of different religious traditions – mainly Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, the faith of my own family. I understood that religion isn't something simple; even in my own family there are people who have a strong Christian faith and also believe in reincarnation. I have always been fascinated by religion – the stories, the rituals, the beliefs, the experience of something bigger than us and how this all moves people to be and act in the world, to know and understand themselves and their relationship to their community and world. My decision to do a Master of Arts (MA) in Religious Studies arose out of an Honours level paper I wrote about Sri Lanka and the religious dimensions of the nationalist identities which developed there. This project pushed me in lots of ways. On a deeply personal level I felt I was discovering a piece of my own identity and history – and faith too. On another level, the project (and my excellent supervisors) pushed me to think analytically and creatively. My writing also improved dramatically. These are the key skills I took into employment. The Religious Studies major allows you to confront conflicting points of view and to honour these points of view while trying to analyse them in a meaningful way. I use this skill in many arenas of my own life, including my last permanent role as senior operational policy analyst at the Ministry of Education in the Te Reo Maori team. This team has historically led a number of innovative and groundbreaking pieces of work. I found I was constantly challenged to put words to things which hadn't been articulated before. My work, like my study, required me to think laterally and creatively, ask good questions that elicit important information and to be persuasive and analytical – both in speaking and writing. Sometimes people have wildly different perspectives on an issue and I find myself having to get to the bottom of the core concern they are expressing. I then try to figure out how we can address those core concerns to find a way forward. I am currently using my religious studies degree outside paid employment as a mother! My little girl is constantly growing and developing and at times, we are both bewildered and uncertain about what is going on. My Religious Studies degree trained me to be attentive and considered in how

I'm interacting with others and my environment – I believe this training is invaluable as a mother of a toddler! I recommend trying out Religious Studies courses that pique your interest or that are connected to other programmes of work you are doing. Religion really does touch all areas of our lives and I think Religious Studies can deeply enrich and complement other programmes of study, as well as being a fascinating and challenging major in its own right.

### Alan Edwards

Senior Policy Analyst  
Office of Ethnic Communities Te  
Tari Matawaka

I came to Religious Studies at postgraduate level, following a Bachelor of Arts (BA) at the University of Melbourne, where I studied Spanish, Italian, Philosophy and History. The decision to do Religious Studies was largely inspired by my travels throughout Asia, which sparked a fascination with India. My combined interests in Philosophy, History and India led me to Religious Studies, where I focused on South Asia. My postgraduate years at Wellington were immensely rewarding and presented me with many excellent opportunities. I received a research award that allowed me to conduct archival research in India, and a Faculty grant to present a paper at a conference in Australia. I also had the opportunity to tutor for the Programme over six trimesters.

I gained a lot of valuable skills, knowledge and experience from this, and met many talented and interesting people along the way. I was also privileged to have two excellent mentors whose guidance extended as far as offering me weekly Sanskrit tuition. The main skills I gained from my studies relate to research, communication, and creative and critical thinking. The transferability of these skills, plus a broad knowledge of South Asia and the world's religions, gave me the credentials to secure a position at the Office of Ethnic Communities, where I work as a senior policy analyst. The job is a great fit because it concerns cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. My role at Ethnic Communities shows that a degree in Religious Studies carries employable value in the 'real world'. If you take Religious Studies, Victoria's world-class department will give you the opportunity to encounter humanity at its most fascinating and perplexing, and importantly, you will be well-placed to get a great job when you finish.



### Negar Partow

Senior Lecturer, Security Studies  
Massey University

Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington has had significant impact in my academic and career development. I came to Wellington from Tehran-Iran in March 2002 as the result of being accepted for the Master's degree. Religious Studies soon became my second home. The professional and friendly atmosphere of the Programme not only assisted me to study, but also enabled me to overcome the problems of starting my life in a new country. I then began working as a tutor, and in later years I became a guest lecturer and course coordinator in Religious Studies. I continued my studies and worked in the Programme until I completed my PhD. The experience of teaching under the supervision of highly qualified academics was very valuable and prepared me to apply for full-time academic positions in the last year of my studies. Religious Studies is a very multicultural programme and working with others, both students and tutors, gave me the opportunity to learn from other cultures and prove my ability to work in multicultural teams. This experience was most valuable when I was applying for jobs. In addition, Religious Studies enabled me to develop my ideas about the role of religion in national and international security discourses, and to apply for my present position at Massey University.

During my studies I further developed skills in analytical thinking, research methods and writing. These skills proved to be critical in my academic development. During my postgraduate time in Religious Studies I studied a wide range of theories and developed skills to apply them to real case studies and understand their limits. During the time of writing my PhD these studies became the foundations for developing my own theory on the relationship between religion and security. What I have loved most about Religious Studies is the career opportunity it offered me. Students who join the Programme can apply for jobs in both the public and private sectors, particularly as the general awareness about the role of religion in world's affairs increases.





## Zane Mather

Education Evaluator  
Education Review Office



The impetus for my decision to major in Religious Studies came while travelling. I had a background in Philosophy, so there was always an attraction to the 'big questions', but the shift to Religious Studies happened for me in Cambodia as I was wandering about the temples in Angkor Thom. I was responding to the buildings on a largely aesthetic level but when I noticed a number of monks performing devotions, I was struck by the fact that this was a living religious site for them. I found that contrast quite compelling. This led me to begin to read works on comparative religion and religious philosophy, and so led on to the study I pursued at Wellington. I ended up writing about Christian pacifism in New Zealand, which is fairly far from the original animating idea, but that's the beauty of Religious Studies. The most enjoyable part of my studies was being challenged by and thinking through ethical issues. To me, that is the most rewarding aspect of education – being put in that chaotic state where all previous certainties are up in the air, and then to read, think and write my way out of it. I think a tolerance for that kind of ambiguity is a necessity in a world where people differ so fundamentally on matters of the utmost importance.

The skills I gained relate to research, analysis, synthesis and writing. I was fortunate in having a supervisor who insisted upon clarity and economy of expression, whereas my inclinations are to the elaborate. This was very useful in preparing me for a work environment where directness and accessibility of writing are very important imperatives. These are all skills that are helpful in my current position as an analyst working on National Evaluation topics for the Education Review Office (ERO). With my degree, I was able to demonstrate that I had gained experience and strategies for approaching and understanding unfamiliar data; and in addition, for bringing that information into a relationship with an existing body of literature, hopefully to write something illuminating which connects the specific context to the big ideas that lie behind it. My job involves analysing many case studies, drawing out themes and synthesising those themes for inclusion in reports on the national situation, which takes into account the broader context of education in New Zealand and the work of policy-makers and academics. For students considering Religious Studies as a major, I would say

that, although it is not an obvious vocational course, the skills and attitudes you cultivate are highly prized by employers. The subject matter is as deep as it gets – religious practices, institutions and attitudes are things that motivate people in the most profound ways. To be able to think clearly about them imparts a discipline and broad view, which is invaluable, not just in terms of research and related work, but also for understanding people and one's own place in the world.

## Thomas Appleton

Political Second Secretary, New Zealand Embassy, Beijing  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade



I dabbled in a variety of subjects during my undergraduate years before stumbling upon Religious Studies via the perennial classic, the "Introduction to Eastern Religions" course. What attracted me and kept me hooked was how Religious Studies examined not only the fundamental beliefs and practices of humanity, but also how religion was essential for understanding an increasingly diverse world. My favourite courses at 300- and 400-level explored the relationships between religion and politics, science, and death and dying.

Nothing was beyond the gaze of Religious Studies and its engaging lecturers – hip-hop, hippies, rugby, the movie *The Matrix* and "the Big Bang" were all fair game. Religious Studies gave me a solid grounding in the core liberal arts skills – analytical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, cross-cultural analysis, and the ability to research and synthesise new ideas. This background was invaluable when I headed overseas, in the cross-cultural workplace and at graduate school, and upon my return to New Zealand, when I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

My advice to undergraduate students is to take a wide range of papers in your first couple of years, and then focus on those that deeply interest you. If you major in something interesting (but not necessarily "career-orientated"), you will have a more fulfilling experience, get better grades; and most importantly, be better placed to do something meaningful upon graduation. Kia kaha e hoa.