

Managerial response to:

Research Review Theology & Religious Studies (© 2013 QANU Q 354)

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UCW advice d.d. 17 September 2013

Discussed with and approved by University Board in BO 1 April 2014

Summarized by R&V

Conclusions

The two most important conclusions of the Peer Review Committee (PRC) concern the quality of research and the suitability of the Centre for Religious Studies (CRS) profile, also for the Protestant Theological University.

- (1) The PRC judged that, among the institutes and programmes assessed in this national Review, the three CRS programmes occupied the first and second places, and a fifth shared place. And: "Taken as a whole, the University of Groningen, where the two excellent programmes ... are located, has obtained the best scores and presents excellent provisions for the future" (p.7).
- (2) Regarding the recent relocation of the Protestant Theological University to Amsterdam and Groningen, the committee explicitly remarks that "In the Committee's view the PThU may have even better chances for survival as an undivided unit at Groningen, because the Faculty at the RUG is more focused on Religious Studies; the PThU could then become a kind of Theological Seminary or church-committed Divinity School at its side, a combination whose fecundity has already been proven in the USA" (p. 34). This observation of the Research Review committee could prove a relevant consideration if a discussion would arise in the PThU whether the PThU should be reduced to one location.

Criticism and suggestions

There is also constructive criticism in the PRC report, mainly concerning the profile of the three new departments in which the research for the new assessment period is structured:

1. "Jewish, Christian and Islamic Origins": receives praise and the addition of Islamic origins to Biblical Studies is deemed appropriate: "The Biblical Studies group is a world-leading programme of researchers, well aware of the needs and opportunities for new research. The addition of the study of Islamic origins to the programme is academically sound as well as increasing the societal relevance of the group's work" (p. 96).
2. "Comparative & Historical Study of Religion": is stimulated to articulate a sharper and more coherent focus: "From the outside, the research group might appear as an arbitrary assemblage of disciplines rather than a coordinated programme. While clarifying the practice of comparison in the study of religion, the research group is well-positioned to engage in interdisciplinary conversations about comparison more generally. Successfully navigating a transition in leadership, the programme needs to formulate a compelling vision of the research group's coherence and its distinctive profile in the study of religion in the Netherlands" (p. 97).
In response to this criticism, the department has developed a stronger focus, and has shortened its name to "Comparative Study of Religion". The department has formulated a research programme "Religion on the Ground" in order to facilitate collaborative research into comparative study of religion that is representative of the diverse perspectives in the department. To help strengthening the critical comparison between constructions of "Eastern" and "Western" religions, the Board of the Faculty has decided to invest in the department's expertise in Eastern Religions by appointing a new Rosalind Franklin fellow in Eastern Religions, an expert on Buddhism in China.

3. “Christianity, Culture and Philosophy”: the PRC had the impression that the department’s Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain is predominantly sociological in nature, and would hence better fit the profile of the second department. Similarly, the department’s research project in consolation is thought to have a specifically psychological ring to it, which would also better fit the second department, where the psychologists of religion have been placed: “from the outside it seems that psychology may find itself uneasily split between two new groups. Moreover, ‘Religion and the Public Domain’ does not seem to be a research programme that would unite early modern church historians and philosophers of religion. Indeed it seems (again from the outside) to belong more to sociology of religion, and so to the second group. So there are questions about whether the new third group is really coherent or helpful to the self-understanding of its researchers” (p. 98).

This criticism shows that the profile of the third department gives a wrong impression. Its aim is to unite the historical and philosophical perspectives on Christianity, as a combination of the disciplines of Church history and Western philosophy of religion. To convey this message more clearly, the department’s name has been changed to “Christianity & the History of Ideas”, and its profile defined as the study of the gradual transition of Western, specifically European, thought from Christianity through secularism to what has been described as post-secularism. It is in this context that the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain and the research project on religious and philosophical modes of consolation are to be understood. Name, profile and research projects have now been more sharply focused. The Board of the Faculty has decided to strengthen this new profile through the strategic appointment of a postdoc and PhD student in this field.

Further measurements

In line with the KNAW report “Quality Indicators for Research in the Humanities”, the Research Review report highly recommends that for a proper output measurement, DGO (the Netherlands Council of Theology and Religious Studies) develops a national list with rankings of journals, book series and publishers (p. 10). DGO is now taking action and has just established a task force for the compilation of such a list, in close cooperation with DLG (the Netherlands Council of Arts & History).

Finally, in order to further improve the faculty’s success rate in external research funding, the Board of the Faculty, in conjunction with the Faculty of Arts, will appoint a funding officer with effect from September 1st. This officer will assist staff members in the preparation of research grant applications. In a research memo, the Board of the Faculty has also more clearly defined the expectations regarding research output and investment in research grant applications.

Through the above responses to the Research Review, the faculty seeks to maintain the excellent, world-leading character of the research of departments 1 and 2, and to promote the newly constituted department 3 to the same level of excellence.