

Summary self-evaluation Report Research 2018-2023

Centre for Religious Studies

The CRS is dedicated to the study of the religion factor in culture and society. Research is organised in three departments, each with its own focus: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Origins, Comparative Study of Religion, and Christianity and the History of Ideas. In addition, the faculty harbours five thematic expertise centres, which act as network platforms to facilitate multi- and interdisciplinary research, inside and outside the faculty and university. The CRS board encourages a high degree of autonomy for its researchers so that they can create for themselves a productive balance between individual research and collaborative projects within and across the programmes and the centres.

CRS's mission is to foster cutting-edge research in the study of religion. We strive for societal engagement and knowledge exchange, and provide the public, the government, and NGOs with academically supported knowledge and insights to enter into a process of mutual reflection on religion, culture, and society. The underlying vision is that religion matters, as it continues to play a central role in societies around the world.

Our mission and vision inform our key targets. In the period under review, the share of refereed journal publications has increased to 29% (compared to 16% in the previous period). On average, 80% of our publications are open access. In 2023, 46% of our associate and full professors were female. Our research remains of high quality. In the period under review, CRS succeeded in obtaining over €4.5 million in external funding, and over €500K from NGOs and government. Our researchers have been successful in highly competitive individual and collaborative grants. NWO is the largest funder of CRS projects; funding from ZonMw and Horizon Europe has seen a significant increase over the past six years. CRS research quality is also evidenced by prestigious prizes and fellowships awarded to our researchers. Our academic impact is high, as demonstrated by an FWCI of 2.6 and even of 4.35 in the 16 topics of our Core Area. In addition, of our papers 5.3% of our papers belongs to the international top 1%, and 24.2% belongs to the international top 10% most-cited papers. We also invest a great deal of time and energy in societal outreach and impact: we develop products for specific societal target groups (e.g., diplomats and healthcare professionals), regularly in co-creation with societal partners, and popularise products for a broader audience (e.g., blogs and a MOOCs). Publications for professionals and the public amount to 20% of our output.

We commit to maintaining our status as an international centre of excellence in religious studies through a continued focus on academic community, research output and societal relevance, and on leadership and talent development. We aim to connect to connect with large funding opportunities regionally, nationally, and internationally. Our strong connections with university and external partners place us in an excellent position for inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations, also with the university's four thematic Schools, and to continue strengthening our societal impact strategy.

Case studies

1. Transforming a field of research: AI-based research on the Dead Sea Scrolls

The basic idea has been to combine the strengths of qualitative approaches from the humanities as well as quantitative approaches from the sciences and to push the boundaries in these fields in order to unlock new data and gain fresh insights into the scribes of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their world.

We have created a new interdisciplinary research field by combining palaeography, chemistry, radiocarbon dating, and AI. We have succeeded in creating innovative and top-notch approaches to solving long-standing problems in the field of ancient manuscripts studies. For example, the 2021 PLOS ONE study (Popović, Dhali, Schomaker) has already gained traction in various disciplines, being cited in the field of AI as well as other manuscript cultures studies (e.g., ancient Aegean scripts, Greek papyri, Greek and Latin codices, Mediaeval Studies), and it was featured in the important [state-of-the-art survey of machine learning for ancient languages by Thea Sommerschild et al.](#) In April 2021, we organised an international online [conference on digital palaeography and Hebrew/Aramaic scribal culture](#) that was very well attended. Our research received considerable media attention, highlighting also various of our junior researchers, for example: [BBC](#), [ABC](#), [Haaretz](#), [El País](#), [New Scientist](#), [De Morgen](#), [The Jerusalem Post 1](#), [The Jerusalem Post 2](#).

The viability of our research strategy is also demonstrated by the continuing careers of junior/early career researchers in the ERC project “The Hands that Wrote the Bible,” the NWO/FWO project “Models of Textual Communities and Digital Palaeography of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” and in individual PhD projects in the Qumran Institute. Ayhan Aksu continues with a NWO Rubicon grant on Jewish-Nabataean cultural encounters as Postdoc at the KU Leuven. Mirjam Bokhorst continues her academic career in a Habilitation research position at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Maruf Dhali continues as an Assistant Professor in a joint position between our faculty and that of Science and Engineering. Eelco Glas continues as a Postdoc at Aarhus University in the ERC project “An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives” by Elisa Uusimäki. Gemma Hayes continues as a Postdoc in Yonatan Adler’s research project on tefillin and mezuzot at Ariel University. Ruwan van der Iest continues as a Lecturer at our faculty. Drew Longacre, together with Brent Strawn (Duke University), received a prestigious NEH (USA) grant to work on a critical text edition of the Book of Psalms. Hanneke van der Schoor continues as a Postdoc at the KU Leuven in the ERC project “A New Approach to the Evolution of Texts Based on the Manuscripts of the Targums” by Hector Patmore. Daniel Waller received a competitive Niels Stensen Fellowship and continued his academic career as a Postdoc at the University of Oxford. Jason Zurawski continued his academic career as an Institute Fellow at the Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and now as a Lecturer at the Department of Middle East Studies, University of Michigan.

As a future outlook, we mention that Popović has been invited to join the Programme Committee for the first [ACL Workshop on Machine Learning for Ancient Languages](#) in August 2024, sponsored by, e.g., the [Vesuvius Challenge](#). Also, forthcoming exhibitions have expressed their interest to highlight our research and asked for our cooperation (Shrine of the Book/Israel Museum, Jerusalem, British Museum, London, and IAA exhibitions at various venues in the USA).

2. Creating a thematic hub: “Death and the End of Life”

The faculty has worked strategically to showcase and enhance its research on key societal challenges—themes that are also represented in the university’s creation of four overarching Schools. In this vein, the faculty has launched its “[Centre for Religion, Health and Wellbeing](#)” in November 2018 to contribute from the perspective of theology and religious studies to the healthy ageing research that is clustered in the [Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health](#).

“[Death and the End of Life](#)” is one of four thematic hubs in the centre. It fills an important lacuna precisely in the context of research and policy work on health and wellbeing, where upbeat predictions and policies for prolonging healthy, active and autonomous lives have often crowded out uncomfortable questions about terminal illness, death and bereavement. Since its inception, “Death and the End of Life” has been the home of research on spiritual care in the palliative context, the ritualisation of the end of life, death and bereavement, the current impact of traditions of consolation as well as socially and environmentally sustainable funerary practices against the background of cultural and ecological change—societal challenges where religious studies and theology continue to be important conversation partners even in largely secular contexts. Strategic hires (Visser, Mathijssen) have enhanced the thematic hub, which is today the premier cluster for research on religion and end-of-life related practices in the Netherlands.

Right from the start, the research of “Death and the End of Life” has proven to ‘hit a nerve’ with funding bodies, organisations, and the public in the Netherlands and abroad. The research has been supported by four major grants (Jedan, Mathijssen, Muthert, and Visser), and has contributed to the formation of cross-faculty, national, and international research collaborations.

Focusing on a key societal challenge, outreach and impact have been central to the research hub’s activities. Hub researchers have provided workshops and courses to numerous organisations, ranging from university and regional bodies (e.g., Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health, Nedergraf, Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken), to national organisations (e.g., Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving, Landelijke Organisatie voor Begraafplaats, De Funeraire Academie, Terebinth, Palliaweb, Integraal Kankercentrum Nederland (IKNL), DELA, Yarden, and Agora, Vereniging voor Geestelijke VerZorging (VGVZ) Nederland). In the Netherlands their work is regularly disseminated in national media, for instance in journals such as Volkskrant, NRC and Trouw, as well as in professional funerary magazines, such as Vakblad Uitvaart and Brancheblad Uitvaartzorg. The hub’s work has also resulted in clinical guidelines and policy advice for the Dutch palliative care sector (Muthert, [on dealing with grief](#); Visser, [on depression and anxiety](#)), for the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (Mathijssen, [on new funerary practices](#)), and for municipal policy makers across Northern Europe (Jedan, [on funerary needs of migrants and minorities](#)).

3. Agenda-setting research and impact: Centre for Religion and Heritage

For a long time, the faculty has had a group of scholars working on Christian liturgy and church architecture and interiors. With personnel changes due to retirements and the acceptance of a senior professorship at a university abroad, the faculty decided to re-invigorate, but also to refocus its work on heritage: more broadly focused on religion and heritage (material and immaterial), also outside Christianity, and reaching out to include heritage beyond Europe. This has led to the creation of the [Groningen Centre for Religion and Heritage](#). After the strategic hire of new staff (Irving, Weir), the CRH has emerged as a nationally and internationally recognized leader in heritage studies, with significant impact in academia and society. It has pursued two main areas of action: it has brought heritage studies and religious studies into a fruitful dialogue and it has led collaborative efforts to address marginalised communities within European and global heritage landscapes.

Since its inception, the centre has been able to set the research agenda on the intersection of religion and heritage. Highly recognised in the field is the groundbreaking international conference “Religious Heritage in a Diverse Europe” in 2019, co-organized by Weir and Wijnia (now head curator at the Museum Catharijneconvent). This effort culminated in the acclaimed 2023 [Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe](#), setting the field’s standard.

Building on this momentum, the Centre was key to two Erasmus Plus adult education projects— which combined storytelling, arts, and community involvement to foster social inclusion. Through outputs such as Muslim Heritage Trails, educational handbooks and policy presentations in Brussels, these projects actively bridged academia and society, nurturing understanding and cooperation. In 2023, centre members led and now manage the successful bid for the Erasmus Plus project European Pathways to Minority Religious Heritage (Irving, Van Dijk, Weir) with minority communities, arts organisations, and universities in Belgium and Spain. Currently, centre members are working towards gaining the European Union’s financial support for a new global Master Programme on religion and critical heritage studies (Irving, Jedan, Mucciarelli, Van Dijk, Weir).

The Centre for Religion and Heritage has strategically tried to enhance its impact. In this vein, it has created, and is the key node in, the [Dutch Network for Religious Heritage](#) that includes many of the leading university centres and heritage institutions. The importance of the network was recognized by the [Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands](#), which awarded two grants for a series of workshops for students, professionals, and the public around the Netherlands. Key to the centre’s success is its strong connection with regional partners, for instance the Foundation of Groningen Churches and the Province of Groningen.