The Research Institute for Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR) provides an inspiring and productive research environment for high-quality research in systematic philosophy, theology and religious studies as well as in their histories. The institute produces critical and prominent contributions to current scholarly and scientific debates. Researchers also contribute to societal debates and offer reflection on scientific developments with high societal impact, both as contributions to society and as feedback to science.

The PTR research institute consists of three thematically organized, multi-disciplinary research programmes:

Programme I: Competing Worldviews
This programme’s subtitle is: Philosophy, Theology, and Science as Competitors and Complements. The programme addresses the – often complicated – relationship between philosophical, scientific and religious views on humankind, society and the natural world. Both the history of these problematic issues and their current status are investigated. The programme encompasses projects that focus on specific concepts (such as e.g. the concept of ‘natural law’), methods (e.g. explanation vs. understanding) and institutions (e.g. the Inquisition or the University). It is carried out by researchers from History of Philosophy (Prof. C. Lüthy), Systematic Religious Studies (Prof. A.J.M. Van den Hoogen), History of Church and Christianity (Prof. D.A.T. Müller) and Fundamental Philosophy (Prof. Van Haute).

Prof. Christoph Lüthy published a book on the prodigy David Gorlaeus (1591-1612), a theology student and the first Dutch atomist.
Programme II: Cognitive Humanities

The point of departure of the Cognitive Humanities programme is the fact that culture, which prominently includes language and religion, and the human cognitive system are inextricably intertwined. On the one hand, language, religion and other cultural artefacts are products of the human mind. On the other hand, they provide a unique cognitive niche within which the human mind can function and flourish. Researchers in the programme investigate language and religion by utilizing existing insights into the functioning of the human cognitive system and, conversely, investigating the human cognitive system through insights into language and religion. The programme involves collaboration between researchers from Comparative Religious Studies (Prof. H.J.M. Venbrux), Empirical and Practical Religious Studies (Prof. C.A.M. Hermans), Textual Sources of Judaism and Christianity (Prof. E.J. Van Wolde) and Philosophy of Mind and Language (Prof. M.V.P. Slors).

Programme III: Modernity Contested

Modernization encompasses the growing impact of science and technology as well as the rationalisation and the individualization of society. Processes of modernisation are often criticised by communities with strong religious identities. Researchers working in this field investigate the status and legitimacy of various critiques of modernity. They focus both on political and moral forms of critique and on religiously motivated forms such as the rejection of modernity by Muslim or Christian fundamentalists. The programme is a collaboration between researchers in Islamic Studies (Prof. Van Nieuwkerk) and Practical Philosophy (Prof. Wils).

Research facilities

The faculty library, which is integrated in the central humanities library, has excellent collections of books and journals on philosophy, theology and religious studies. It houses one of the world’s largest microfilm collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts on logic, semantics, natural philosophy, metaphysics and theology. The library possesses several special collections and includes the Catholic Documentation Centre – a unique source for anthropological and missiological research.

Collaboration

The PTR institute promotes and facilitates national and international collaboration at three levels:

1. It encourages individual researchers to participate in national research schools accredited by the Royal Netherlands Academy for the Arts and Sciences as well as in international groups such as ESF research networks. One aim here is to provide specialised research projects with expertise. Another is to remain in contact with national and international developments in relevant fields and to make Nijmegen’s PTR research visible among peers.

2. International collaboration at the level of chairs allows researchers to acquire international experience, facilitates the co-authoring of papers with colleagues abroad and expands the critical mass of the PTR research groups. For this reason the institute has formal agreements with many universities abroad, including high-ranking institutes such as the universities of Edinburgh, Fribourg and Paris IV (la Sorbonne).

3. The three research programmes allow for programme-based cooperation with existing research groups or institutes with complementary research interests. The aim here is to strive for synergy rather than overlap. Thus the programmes can become recognised internationally without giving up their unique profiles. Currently, partnerships are being established with e.g. the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (programme III) and with the Religion, Cognition and Culture programme at Aarhus University, Denmark (programme II).
Research results

Programme I: Competing Worldviews
Marking the completion of three large research projects – 1) ‘From Natural Philosophy to Science’ (ESF), 2) ‘Form of the Body or Ghost in the Machine’ (NWO Vidi), and 3) ‘Visualizing the Invisible’ (NWO programme) – the History of Philosophy chair organised a high-profile international conference on ‘Image, Imagination and Cognition’ at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies. Prof. Lüthy published a book on David Gorlaeus. Dr Palmerino contributed to a polemic on thought experiments in the journal Centaurus. Dr Spruit received a Radboud Science Award for his discovery and publication of the Spinoza Vatican manuscript. Dr Hiro Hirai was awarded the 2013 Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science Prize.

The study on the Cathar heretics by Prof. Müller (History of Church and Christianity) led to the establishment of a new research organization ‘CIRCAED’, in collaboration with the University of Toulouse and the EHSS in Paris. Research on the early Roman Inquisition opened access to Vatican archives, giving insight into i) liturgy and monastic regulation and ii) the differentiation between Protestants and Catholics and iii) the political motivation for Constantine’s conversion to Christianity. Prof. Teule initiated cooperation with Russian theological institutes on human rights and orthodoxy and published reports on present-day Christian minorities in the Middle East.

Research in Systematic Religious Studies focused on the relationship between Christianity and modernity. Dr Van Erp studied new approaches in incarnational and sacramental theology. Dr Hübenthal analysed the relationship between sports and Christianity. Prof. Van den Hoogen published on corporate social responsibility from a theological perspective. Dr De Kesel studied the monotheistic ban on images in the confrontation with the Shoah. Dr Van de Brandt continued her study of the development of Etty Hillesum’s spirituality and Dr Hense analysed the relationship between theatre and spirituality.

Within Fundamental Philosophy, Dr Van der Heiden completed his project on hermeneutics as ‘giving a voice to those who have no voice’. He initiated a project on the concept of ‘event’. Prof. Van Haute deepened Freud’s ‘crystal principle’, according to which human beings should be examined from the perspective of psycho-pathology, using recent developments in philosophy. Dr Vastering completed, together with colleagues, a comprehensive historic overview of female philosophers. E. Delahaye, MA and Dr Cimino started an NWO-funded project, in collaboration with Groningen University, on the philosophical reception of the letters of St. Paul.

Programme II: Cognitive Humanities
Within Textual Sources of Judaism and Christianity, after demonstrating that standard methods of dating Biblical texts based on linguistic data are flawed, Dr Rezetko has developed an alternative, which will be published in a monograph in 2013. Prof. Van Wolde applied her cognitive linguistic method of Bible research to the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and to the Rainbow story (Genesis 9). She demonstrated that the rainbow does not represent a peaceful covenant, but God’s handing over of his fighting bow as a transfer of power. Prof. Van der Watt conducted a comprehensive study of the research on the Johannine literature in Africa. He also conceptualised, edited and published the interlinear Greek-Afrikaans New Testament.

Within Philosophy of Mind and Language, Prof. Geurts developed an influential new analysis of ‘framing effects’. Dr De Bruin analysed second-person approaches in cognitive neuroscience and demonstrated the need to take reciprocity into account. Prof. Slors published a widely read and very well reviewed book for a wide audience on free will and neuroscience. Dr Bary won the Women Professors Network Prize in the humanities (intended to honour and encourage young women academics).

Within Empirical and Practical Religious Studies the Cognitive Humanities theme is investigated in real-life cases of contextualised cognition, education and self-understanding. Dr Willems et al. conducted a study on teachers as ‘virtue models’ for pupils in Catholic primary education. In an empirical study among psychiatric patients Dr Scherer-Rath et al. confirmed the congruence between patients’ ultimate life goals and their interpretation of contingent life events.

Research on ‘lived religion’ within Comparative Religious Studies probed the limits of secularization. Prof. Venbrux et al. found that in dealing with death a shift in emphasis has occurred from otherworldliness to maintaining kinship ties. C. Venhorst found that, contrary to widespread assumptions, Muslim migrants do adjust to Dutch norms. Prof. Van der Velde showed how lay Western Buddhism is modelled on monastic Asian Buddhism. Prof. Nissen, et al. discerned a demarginalization of alternative spiritualities. Dr Quartier et al. showed how monastic spirituality and pilgrimage are acquiring new meanings. Prof. Nissen co-edited a book comparing Polish and Dutch religious culture. The Hermesdorf Prize for young talent was awarded to Sophie Bolt of the Refiguring Death Rites research group.

Programme III: Modernity Contested
The relationship between modernity and Islam has been addressed in various ways in research within Islamic Studies. Dr Meijer edited a book on the Muslim Brothers in Europe and organized a conference on that theme. Prof. Van Nieuwkerk organized a double panel at the American Anthropological Association (San Francisco) on the
Examples of contributions to cultural memory include projects on the Shoah, on Catharism, on Spinoza and on the until now almost forgotten Dutch academic prodigy David Gorlaeus. Through public lectures, books, newspaper articles and media interviews the institute’s research caters for large audiences as well as for societal organizations dedicated to a variety of aspects of our cultural heritage.

With expertise on topics such as Islam in Europe, the nature and sources of democracy, the role of religion in contemporary society, the impact of neuroscience on our image of man or the impact of Darwinism on our worldview, researchers in the PTR institute contribute to a range of high-profile societal debates in public lectures and fora, newspaper articles, interviews, books, and media performances. The value, significance and impact of contributions of the institute’s researchers to societal debates lies in the fact that they bring the results of sound academic and scholarly research into arenas that are often dominated by opinion.

An international conference on The Sources of Human Rights was organized by Prof. Wils in November. Research within Practical Philosophy has yielded a number of high-profile results. Dr Terpstra, in collaboration with Dr Ruth Baumann-Hölzle, published a book on the future of health care in which a philosophical diagnosis and sustainable solutions for many of the problems in this area are presented. Dr Becker, Dr Van Stokkom and Dr Eikenaar wrote a book on ‘Citizens as Trustees.’ And Prof. Van Tongeren published a book on moral experience, virtue ethics and ‘life as art’ as well as a book on Nietzsche and European nihilism.

Societal impact

Research in philosophy, theology and religious studies allows for three kinds of knowledge-transfer with considerable societal impact: 1) It contributes to cultural memory and the sustains our cultural heritage, 2) It offers scholarly and academically informed contributions to societal debates, 3) It produces advice for societal organisations e.g. in the form of commissioned reports. The policy of the PTR research institute is to promote these forms of knowledge-transfer and thereby to highlight the societal relevance of the research. To this effect we have introduced a new way of measuring research output in which knowledge-transfer yields credits along-side scholarly and scientific output. In the coming year we will also organize research meetings with a panel of societal stakeholders to develop new strategies to enhance the institute’s societal impact.

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Advice, often in the form of commissioned reports, is a third kind of society-oriented research output of the institute. Researchers within Empirical and Practical Religious Studies, for instance, have advised Dutch Catholic primary schools and developed a ‘toolkit’ for improving enhancement of civic virtues in classroom situations. The KASKI, a research centre specializing in issues of religion and society, published advisory reports at the request of various societal organizations. And research on contemporary death rites in the Chair of Comparative Religious Studies has yielded advice to funeral organisations, museums, artists, ritual councillors and accompanists, medical nurses and spiritual advisors in hospitals and the Dutch Ministry of Justice.
Key publications


Slors, M.V.P. (2012). Dat had je gedacht! Brein, bewustzijn en vrije wil in filosofisch perspectief. Amsterdam: Boom.


Dissertations: 19
Academic publications: 204
Professional publications: 80
Future research
The three research programmes, described in the first section were only conceived and organized towards the end of last year. Consolidation of these programmes, strengthening their internal coherence, and developing their identities and profiles are the main aims of the PTR research policy for the coming years. An important means of achieving these goals is the development of research projects – and the consequent acquisition of research grants – on topics that straddle the expertise of the various chairs, while contributing to a single programme. Establishing international cooperation with partner research groups is another. Formal assessment of the PTR institute by a committee of international experts in 2013 is expected to yield valuable feedback for the further improvement of the institute.