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**Statement Executive Board regarding the
research review of Religion & Theology**

DATE

23 June 2025

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ENCLOSURE(S)

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Subject: statement Executive Board regarding the research review of Religion & Theology

The Executive Board received and considered the final report of the research evaluation of Religion & Theology. This evaluation covered the period 2018-2023. It was conducted in the context of the national Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP). An external evaluation committee received a written self-evaluation report written by the (then) Faculty of Religion & Theology, FRT. During a site visit on 18 and 19 November 2024 the committee had meetings and held interviews with different categories of staff involved in research at FRT. The self-evaluation report and this site visit formed the basis for the assessment report.

According to the committee the research is innovative and of high quality and found that FRT has kept its position as a leading international knowledge centre. It met a vibrant and increasing open research culture, characterized by academic freedom and bottom-up initiatives. The societal relevance is impressive, for instance in topics like migration and conflict resolution, but a more explicit strategy would help to further increase the impact. Other recommendations were also made by the committee, they can also be found in the published report. These are:

- Reduce FRT/SRT's structural complexity by regularly evaluating the research group portfolio and taking actions where necessary.
- Enhance FRT's/SRT's profile by investing in societally relevant research topics and outreach, and by seeking the connection with other disciplines such as social science, humanities, and anthropology.
- Formulate a policy on societal relevance and a PR strategy aimed at external parties.
- Enhance the new HR policy by explicitly and regularly discussing alternative career paths such as those formulated as part of 'Recognition and Rewards' with staff members.
- Develop a diversity strategy aimed at attracting and maintain diverse staff.
- Continue to improve PhD policies, trajectories, guidance and success
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The Executive Board received a written response to the assessment report from the faculty which is enclosed in this document. Together with the report and recommendations this was discussed with the faculty board in a meeting devised for this purpose, on 13 June 2025. In this meeting we discussed how to further enhance the valorisation potential. The School of Religion & Theology has, in the new Faculty of

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Social Sciences and Humanities, opportunities for even more cooperation to address societal issues, where religion often plays an important role. We also discussed the staff composition and the need for more strategic personnel planning with a keen eye on the younger generation. The Executive Board is proud of the unit's research and will continue to support the faculty in further enhancing the quality and relevance of the research.

Finally, the Executive Board appreciates the thorough and careful assessment by the committee and wishes to express its gratitude to the committee for the considerable time and effort invested in the evaluation and to the people involved at Religion & Theology for the diligent preparation.

Yours sincerely,
On behalf of the Executive Board

prof. dr. J.J.G. Geurts,
rector magnificus

Enclosure: Reaction of the Faculty Board to the recommendations of the Evaluation Report

**Reaction of the Faculty Board of FRT to the Recommendations of the SEP
Evaluation Report
Faculty of Religion and Theology (FRT), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam**

The Faculty Board of the Faculty of Religion and Theology (FRT) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam sincerely thanks the review committee for its comprehensive and constructive evaluation of our research activities and strategic direction during the 2018–2023 period. We are grateful for the committee’s appreciation of our achievements, including the innovative inter- and multi-disciplinary research across theology and religious studies, our societal impact, and the progress made in PhD policy and academic culture.

In particular, we value the committee’s emphatic recognition of the distinctive integration of theology and religious studies within our faculty—an academic configuration they describe as “absolutely unique, ” and our international “QS-ranking (2024: 27th worldwide, 3rd in Benelux, 1st in the Netherlands).” This acknowledgment affirms a core identity that we have long cultivated: a faculty that sustains disciplinary rootedness while pioneering new forms of engaged and interreligious scholarship. The committee’s judgment that the quality of our research output is high, the innovation of the discipline substantial, and the vitality of theology at VU—both nationally and internationally—strong and promising, is a remarkable affirmation of our collective work.

At the same time, we acknowledge the challenges identified and accept the recommendations as valuable guidance for our ongoing transition to the School of Religion and Theology (SRT) within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSH). Below, we outline our response to the committee’s key recommendations:

1. Reducing Structural Complexity

We fully endorse the recommendation to streamline our organizational structure. As of 1 April 2025, SRT will transition to a single-unit structure without departments. All academic staff will be organized into four clearly defined sections, each representing a coherent area of disciplinary expertise:

- (1) Religious Sources,
- (2) Religious History and Heritage,
- (3) Religious Beliefs and Ethics, and
- (4) Lived Religion and Society.

Each section is led by a section head who reports directly to the Scientific Director of SRT. All research centres, institutions and research groups will be embedded within one of these sections. This rearrangement consolidates previously dispersed structures and ensures a transparent, accountable, and thematically coherent research environment.

Well-functioning research groups will continue to exist as flexible, bottom-up platforms for collaboration across themes, disciplines and traditions. These groups will not have a formal status but are encouraged to foster interdisciplinary innovation and scholarly community. To prevent the structural complexity noted by the committee, SRT will implement a biennial review process of its full research portfolio, including evaluation of viability, alignment with strategic priorities, and measurable impact and output. Research groups demonstrating limited activity or overlapping objectives may be restructured or discontinued, based on transparent criteria including output, funding success, and institutional relevance.

In addition, SRT will appoint academic “public faces” for cross-sectional themes of societal urgency—such as peace and trauma, sustainability/ planetary health, digital religion, home-making, and religious literacy—to ensure societal impact as well as coherence across sections and further stimulate high-impact, interdisciplinary scholarship.

To increase visibility and accessibility, SRT will launch a redesigned website clearly presenting both the formal organizational structure and the faculty’s thematic areas of strength. This interface will support strategic alignment with external partners, funders, and prospective PhDs, and complements our broader communication and valorization strategy.

Through this new structure, SRT ensures the balance between disciplinary rootedness and interdisciplinary agility, offering both clarity and space for innovation.

2. Enhancing Societal Relevance and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

SRT will prioritize societally urgent themes such as peace and trauma, sustainability/planetary health, digital religion, home-making, and religious literacy, and digital humanities. We will identify opportunities for collaboration with SSH disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology) and external partners.

3. Formulating a PR Strategy and Valorization Policy

SRT recognizes the importance of a coherent public identity. A coherent external communication strategy will be developed, highlighting SRT's unique inter- and multireligious expertise and societal impact. This will include a publicly accessible platform sharing podcasts, policy briefs, and research spotlights. Our renewed Valorization Office will coordinate outreach, track impact indicators, monitor impact metrics, and support researchers in engaging with public, governmental, and professional partners and non-academic stakeholders (business). Special attention will be given to underexplored audiences and to enhancing theological presence in societal debates.

4. Strengthening HR Policy and Recognition & Rewards

SRT already explicitly aligns its HR policy with the VU Recognition & Rewards (R&R) framework. Alternative academic career paths—particularly those focused on teaching, valorization, or leadership—will be formalized and actively promoted. Narrative CVs will be used as part of all promotion and evaluation procedures. The Career Track Committee (CTC) will ensure transparency and fairness in promotions. Annual staff surveys will measure understanding and acceptance of R&R principles across ranks. These efforts will be communicated consistently and embedded in ongoing leadership training.

5. Developing a Diversity Strategy

SRT commits to fostering a more diverse academic community. The SRT policy on diversity and inclusion will be aligned with institutional frameworks and presents an excellent opportunity to be anchored within the newly formed Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSH). The plan will target increased representation of women, international scholars, and underrepresented religious traditions in both staffing and PhD cohorts. Strategic partnerships with global theological institutions will be expanded to attract diverse talent, and mandatory bias-awareness training will be implemented for all hiring committees.

6. Continue improving PhD Policies and Success Rates

The Graduate School will continue refining PhD trajectories, with a focus on reducing attrition and enhancing support for external candidates. An annual questionnaire has been implemented to track progress and identify bottlenecks. Cohort-building activities, such as online meetings and interdisciplinary seminars, will be expanded. Supervision capacity will be strengthened by training junior staff in mentorship practices.

Conclusion

The FRT/SRT leadership is committed to implementing the committee's recommendations as part of our strategic vision for 2025–2030. The transition to SRT, though complex, offers an opportunity to renew and reinforce our institutional identity. We are confident that the measures outlined above will strengthen our scholarly cohesion, enhance our public profile, and sustain our academic excellence in an evolving landscape. We express our deep gratitude to the review committee for their insightful and forward-looking feedback, and we look forward to shaping the next chapter of our School's development as a vital international hub for interdisciplinary and societally relevant research in religion and theology.

Prof. Dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten, Dean

Katya Tolstoj, Vice-Dean

Faculty of Religion and Theology/School of Religion and Theology

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

March 2025