

Evaluation of the Faculty of Catholic Theology

Peer Report

4 July 2025

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1. Executive Summary

The evaluation of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna took place from Monday 2 June to Wednesday 4 June 2025. The Rectorate and Faculty leadership had agreed upon two key evaluation topics: the Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” (RaT) and the Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion” (VDTR). The evaluation was conducted at the request of the Rectorate and the Faculty and was coordinated by the university’s office of quality assurance. One panel was set up, which includes the evaluation by AVEPRO.

Members of the expert panel were:

Prof. Dr. Joke van Saane, University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht (Chair)
Prof. Dr. Michael Seewald, University of Münster
Prof. Dr. Anders Runesson, University of Oslo
Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Agius, University of Malta (AVEPRO)

During the preparation period, the panel was provided with all necessary information, including a comprehensive and balanced Self Evaluation Report (SER). All additional requested information was provided immediately. The site visit of three days gave the panel the opportunity for extended discussions and observations. Meetings were organised with the Rectorate, Faculty leadership, leadership and members of both RaT and VDTR, doctoral candidates, students and supporting staff. The selection of meetings and discussion topics was based on the proposed focus areas.

The evaluation took place in a mutually respectful, open and constructive atmosphere.

Summary evaluation

According to the panel of experts, the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna conducts high level international research within an interreligious context, focusing on contemporary societal needs. Both RaT and VDTR are based on this strong research, and contribute to it. Both institutions need a permanent status at the university with corresponding resources, so that the faculty’s research and teaching can be developed responsibly and sustainably.

Strengths

The faculty has a strong interdisciplinary character, which manifests itself in two ways. First, the panel appreciates the interdisciplinarity within the faculty itself. The faculty encompasses not only Catholic

theology and Orthodox theology, it also comprises religious studies and Islamic theology besides social sciences of religion. The faculty also collaborates closely with other institutions within the University of Vienna. Second, the faculty takes advantage of interdisciplinary opportunities in society, especially given the unique location in Vienna, confirmed by the new innovative master programme “Religion in Europe”, and reflected by the diversity in study programmes. According to the panel’s impression, the faculty is very successful in implementing these two forms of interdisciplinarity, with benefits for staff and students.

The faculty is composed of competent and internationally acknowledged researchers and teachers. The research output is without doubt diverse and impressive; the journal JRAT forms an encouraging vehicle for (young) researchers.

Weaknesses and challenges

The faculty is, seen from the Rectorate’s perspective, underperforming in finding third-party funding. The panel strongly recommends that the faculty develops a comprehensive funding strategy for the future. This strategy will require a focus on intensifying collaboration between staff members and within interdisciplinary and interfaculty consortia. However, since the funding context is very limited and challenging, seen from an international perspective, the faculty is already rather successful in the acquisition of third-party funded grants.

The decrease in student numbers is a real challenge. Declining student enrolment is in line with general trends in Europe. The panel is persuaded by the faculty’s solid strategies to address this problem, for example the new teaching programme focusing on different student populations. Given this context of declining student numbers, the surrounding theological institutes in the vicinity of Vienna pose an additional challenge for the faculty. This challenge is tackled by both strengthening critical thinking and opening up for different student populations.

The panel identified two main external risks for the faculty, with consequences for RaT and VDTR. The first risk regards the threat of further budget cuts. The faculty has already given up some important professorships, like Patristics. The faculty manages to cover the most important disciplines for research and teaching, mostly by appointing tenure tracks. Since research quality is directly and above all related to the quality of individual researchers, further budget cuts would threaten to undermine the quality of both research and teaching. The second risk is connected to the very complex surroundings of the faculty, given the combination of the given church frame, legal limits for the specific domain, competition from

independent church-related institutes, small numbers of students and doctoral candidates and university regulations. The faculty needs sufficient resources and degrees of freedom to continue their competent navigation of this complex context.

2. Faculty in General

The Faculty of Catholic Theology is characterized by a strong interdisciplinary orientation. Its research, teaching and impact activities contribute to contemporary (international) theology and societal needs. The responsibility towards the churches is as great as the awareness of the global developments, reflected in the bi-focus on theology and religious studies as scientific disciplines. This bi- or multi-focus results in a very diverse and interdisciplinary team of researchers and teachers, with different cultural and scholarly backgrounds.

The faculty focuses on three key research areas. The first focus is on interdisciplinary research on religion, concentrated within RaT. The transformation of religion in contemporary societies generates research questions on (among others) the history of religion, religion as a social construct, religious minorities, meaning of life and lived religion. These research topics are carried out by interdisciplinary teams. The second focus is on Catholic theology in contemporary discourses, summarized as Catholic Identity. Rooted in the global institute of the Catholic Church, the faculty forms a hub for international researchers and students, contributing to producing future generations of Catholic theologians and priests. Quite unique is the ecumenical context of theology, since the faculty includes Eastern Orthodox theology and Islamic theology and has a strong enduring collaboration with the Faculty of Protestant Theology. The third focus is on the ethical challenges in global society. Several research teams are involved in projects in the areas of bio-ethics, technology and ethics (including AI), and social ethics. The faculty takes a unique position in this field based upon a long history of international research partly built on empirical data. The three key research foci are well chosen areas, adaptive to developments within the scientific domain of theology and religious studies, to societal questions and to the needs of the global church. The different stakeholders from these three areas are taken very seriously, without compromising academic standards.

The central leadership responsibility of the faculty lies with the Dean, supported by two vice-deans and the faculty manager. The faculty encompasses eight departments, covering the encyclopaedia of theological disciplines and religious studies. The departments are led by eight department heads. All

scientific staff members belong to one of the departments. RaT and VDTR are faculty bodies independent of the departments, with independent trans-faculty governance structures (see ch. 3 and 4).

The overall strategy in research and teaching is shaped by scientific developments in theology and religious studies at the one hand, and by societal developments, especially in Austria, at the other hand. The faculty is ambitious in a positive manner, in its rich vision and mission: religion matters a lot in contemporary society. The faculty is aware of societal changes as well as developments within religion, willing to both embrace and to shape these changes while providing theology and religious studies for new generations.

The faculty is composed of very competent and internationally connected and recognized researchers, within their own subdisciplinary fields. They achieve a lot given their limited resources. A strong indicator for the research performance forms the number of scientific publications over the last years. These publications meet without doubt all international standards about quality, ranking, review processes and (societal) impact. This quality is underlined by the high rate of participation in seminars, conferences and special issues, reflecting the international acknowledgement of the research.

The portfolio of study and teaching programmes has – like the research strategy – two main foci: training a new generation of scholars and reflective church professionals, and teaching a diverse student population by enhancing cultural and religious themes. The faculty also plays a socially significant role in training teachers for secondary education on Catholic Religion in Austria. The faculty offers a wide range of degree programmes at all levels.

The panel visited the building in the Schenkenstrasse, which offers classrooms and also houses the library alongside staff offices. Having a permanent physical building is the key resource to develop the faculty as an international hub by retaining synergy effects. Given the impressive library collection that is publicly accessible, it is important to maintain investments in the library as a physical service, parallel to the access to digital sources.

Recommendations

Starting in 2026, a new English-language **teaching programme** on Masters level is launched in cooperation with the Faculty of Protestant Theology. This new programme offers innovative didactics to a diverse student population. The purpose and focus of this new programme are in line with the strategy of RaT and VDTR. The panel recommends a stronger connection between the new Master programme and RaT

/ VDTR in two ways: (1) prepare the students for a PhD-trajectory through specific courses on research methodology and scientific writing, and (2) align the course subjects with the existing research topics within RaT and VDTR.

The faculty has a very **diverse character**, including different disciplines, genders, ethnic identities, religions, nationalities and cultures. The panel values this diversity as impressive. Although the panel observed an inclusive environment and a promoting of a culture of encounter, it is recommended that the faculty develops an inclusion strategy. Good intentions are not sufficient to prevent subjective experiences of exclusion or harassment. To ensure the benefits of inclusive scholarship for the future, a faculty-wide agenda should be implemented, enclosing social encounters, code of conduct and supervision skills, reflecting university policy and regulations.

There are numerous existing projects in **collaboration** with other faculties. These promising cooperations could be developed and monitored in a strategic and systematic way. The faculty should not rely on initiatives elsewhere, but could take a more leading role in establishing new partnerships, directed by their own strategy.

The **leadership teams** consist of capable persons. For the professional development of the faculty, the competency of the several leadership teams can be enhanced by implementing a planning-and-control-cyclus. Knowing, understanding and acting could be aligned to improve practices. Obviously, this recommendation makes sense only if the leadership of the faculty is provided with the sufficient tools to implement and consolidate practices.

In the SER the faculty refers to its **Artificial Intelligence** strategy as a weakness. However, the panel found a lot of expertise on AI. It is recommended that the faculty installs a steering group on AI to develop policy in the different faculty areas involved (plagiarism, data protection, student assessment etc.).

The panel recommends more active **coherence**, including leadership teams, between different structures within the faculty. At present, the different groups (especially regarding the relationship between theology and religious studies) sometimes seem to operate somewhat isolated from each other. By strengthening the integration of different subgroups in the faculty and among students, more focus and coherence can be achieved, which can only make research stronger.

The faculty is a loyal part of the University of Vienna, subscribing to and implementing all university regulations and policies. However, the faculty is exceptional in its specific field, carried out in a

transdisciplinary way. These specifics result in unique students and doctoral candidates, different from the regular student body at the university. The faculty could benefit from **specific tools** for sanctioning, enrolment etc., in addition to university regulations, to cope with this population to ensure a solid percentage of active, successful students.

The implementation of a comprehensive system for **feedback practices** is key. The panel learned from both students and doctoral candidates that shared regulations related to feedback are missing, leading to undesirable differences in practices between individual teachers and supervisors. Since well-established and fully closed feedback systems turn out to be proven key factors in learning processes, improving feedback practices will serve faculty as a whole.

3. Key Evaluation Topic: Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society”

Evaluation

The interdisciplinary Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” (RaT) was founded in 2010. Today, it comprises 63 researchers from eight faculties and numerous disciplines covering a wide range within the humanities, the social sciences, law, and even the life sciences. RaT aims at fostering a pluralistic and democratic society by promoting interdisciplinary research on religion, encouraging open dialogue between diverse religious and secular perspectives, and addressing contemporary societal challenges. From the perspective of the panel, seven points are particularly remarkable regarding RaT:

- (1) RaT plays a key role in the **integration of the internal diversity of the Faculty of Catholic Theology** and makes a significant contribution to the coherence of the faculty’s research agenda. Unlike other faculties of Catholic theology in the German speaking context, the faculty in Vienna also comprises non-Catholic forms of theology (such as Orthodox or Islamic theology) and even non-theological disciplines (such as religious studies). From the perspective of the panel, this is a strength which offers unique possibilities both in the field of research and teaching. But this high level of disciplinary diversity within one faculty can also be a challenge, because different disciplinary logics must be respected. RaT manages to balance the disciplinary requirements of its member disciplines and ensures at the same time close exchange and collaboration.

- (2) RaT is a highly successful **network which connects the Faculty of Catholic Theology to other institutions at the University of Vienna**. Religion cannot be studied exclusively from a theological perspective. Therefore, theological research is to be enhanced by multidisciplinary perspectives. RaT makes sure that the disciplines represented at the Faculty of Catholic Theology are engaged in a lively exchange with disciplines situated in other faculties, such as Jewish studies, gender studies, or evolutionary biology.
- (3) RaT makes a very significant contribution to the **international visibility of research on religion carried out at the University of Vienna**. In the 2024 “QS Ranking”, the University of Vienna received a very good position (rank 21 worldwide) in the field of “Theology, Divinity and Religious Studies”. The ranking considers factors such as academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, and international student ratio. The Faculty of Catholic Theology as a whole and RaT in particular had a significant impact on the positive assessment of the University of Vienna’s programmes on religion in this ranking. The fact that the University of Vienna hosts international events of remarkable scale, such as the European Academy of Religion’s meeting in 2025, underlines the excellent reputation Vienna has as a place to study religion in a multi-faceted way.
- (4) RaT has a **publication output** which is excellent both in number and quality. The “Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” (JRaT) is a Q1-ranked publication. The relatively high number of volumes published in “JRaT Supplementa” and the general RaT book series underline that the publications created, curated, and edited by RaT are attractive places to publish scholarly results.
- (5) RaT has significant success regarding **public outreach activities and science communication**. Religions and their role in processes of transformation are of interest to the general public and form the object of political debates. Scholars working at RaT take this interest seriously, communicate their findings to the public and shape the discussion on the societal relevance of religion in Austria.
- (6) Even though the third-party funding rate of the Faculty of Catholic Theology might be lower than in other disciplines at the University of Vienna, the faculty received – compared to the situation in the humanities in general and in theology in particular – significant grants for its research projects. RaT plays a key role as an attractive **platform for the acquisition of third-party funding**, because it ensures a transdisciplinary embedding of research on religion which is an important factor for grant-giving institutions.

- (7) RaT presents a convincing **strategy for a further development of its conceptual focus**. Given the disciplinary variety at the University of Vienna and the challenges which different versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam face regarding a peaceful coexistence and a fruitful engagement with each other, the choice to focus on “Abrahamic dynamics” seems promising. The plan to move away from a narrower focus on contemporary societies and to strengthen historical perspectives on transformation offers new possibilities to integrate even more disciplines and to give further dynamics to the research carried out at RaT.

Recommendations

The evaluators recommend three measures that appear of particular importance for the further development of RaT:

- (1) RaT has proven that it is a highly successful research centre. The panel strongly recommends that **RaT should be turned into a permanent institution**. This would help to build up and preserve capacities, for example in the field of academic publishing, science communication, or regarding professional advice in the acquisition of grants.
- (2) RaT has dealt very effectively with the limited resources which it has at its disposition. Comparable institutions in Europe have a much higher level of funding. The panel of evaluators recommends a **targeted increase of the RaT budget**, particularly to support the publication activities (JRaT, JRaT Supplementa, RaT Series) which ensure the University of Vienna a prominent position in academic discussions on religion today.
- (3) RaT was built up and is kept alive by the high motivation and the individual engagement of a large number of researchers. This engagement is indispensable and should be valued also in the future. But what started as a project has, 15 years after its inception, turned into a well-established, internationally visible and academically respected institution. Therefore, it is necessary that the institutionally stable character of RaT is also reflected in its organisational setup. The evaluators strongly recommend that **RaT receives a robust governance structure** with clear statutes.

4. Key Evaluation Topic: Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion

Evaluation

Founded in 2021, the Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion (VDTR) represents a recent, innovative, and forward-looking interdisciplinary development within the field of theology and religious studies, nationally and internationally. As societies become increasingly complex across most areas of human innovation and interaction, universities need to develop research and research-based teaching responding to these complexities through new combinations of academic fields as well as through increased collaboration within and between a wide range of disciplines. To meet the needs of today and tomorrow, it is therefore key to move researchers and doctoral students within different disciplines and backgrounds closer to one another, creating improved preconditions for research synergies that stimulate innovation and contribute to setting society on a constructive course forward. Within the field of theology and religious studies, this is what VDTR is positioned to do, and the way the School is structurally put together, including its choice of collaborating partners, makes it well suited to achieve its goals. VDTR integrates the faculty deeper into the shared research structures of the university. The VDTR also aligns the University of Vienna with similar international developments of research schools within the field, which seek increased interdisciplinarity as a response to societal needs. The University of Vienna has a clear potential, with VDTR, to take on a leading role in these developments.

The faculty's highly committed academic and administrative staff is crucial to the realization of VDTR's goals. In order to operationalise their goals, the faculty has identified and works with several partners. The collaboration between the faculty and FPT, including through the recently established DSPL60 (2023), and RaT (see section 3 above) is particularly important in this regard. The wider circle of partners within the humanities (Jewish Studies and Islamic Studies especially, but also religious studies, philosophy of religion, and social scientific research on religion) is significant too, however, and may, over time, prove to be an essential component to the success of the School in terms of its impact on research output and its consequent contribution to a socially sustainable democratic society. The VDTR, as it is envisioned and constructed, is a necessary development for effective education of doctoral candidates. Without it, the faculty would risk to lose not only its comparative advantage nationally, but also diminish its attractiveness internationally, both of which would undermine the University's ability to attract the best and brightest applicants in this field of study.

To achieve its goals of excellence and capacity building, interdisciplinarity, and international visibility and networking, VDTR has developed a number of strategic measures. In addition, an impressive training programme has been put in place. While all of these measures are important and define the efficiency of the VDTR, some of them may be developed to contribute further to realise the School's goals (see recommendations below).

While it is of vital importance for a faculty to attract doctoral candidates from other institutions and internationally – the school has an impressive number of PhD students from the global south – it is also important that the vision and implementation of its doctoral education resonates with the faculty's strategy for its pre-doctoral levels of education. The faculty has commendably worked from a holistic perspective in this regard, and one of the more promising developments is the establishment of the new English-language Master's Degree "Religion in Europe". Such approaches not only provide relevant and correlative education for all levels of education, but also facilitate recruitment to PhD studies from the faculty's own Master's programmes and the transition of MA students into the doctoral programme and VDTR.

According to the panel, the vision of VDTR is innovative and important. It takes the faculty's doctoral education to the next and necessary level, aligning it with contemporary developments in Europe and elsewhere. The faculty has achieved this with its partners based on very few resources and a limited budget. For the VDTR to be institutionally sustainable as it moves forward – not least in terms of its inter-faculty and potential for inter-university and international collaboration and the consequent staff requirements – permanence and predictability are key, including a budget allocation that allows for long-term planning. A permanent institutional status for VDTR provides the necessary structure to meet the high scientific standards required by top institutions today, including an international network, capacity building, and focus on transferrable skills, as well as contributing to meeting societal needs related to religion, integration, and co-existence.

Recommendations

The following recommendations of the evaluators are meant to further strengthening the institutional integration of the VDTR at the faculty and the university, improving the efficiency of some of its current set up, and suggest further measures related to teaching and supervision within the School. The recommendations cover three domains:

(1) Organisation, communication, budget

A robust structure is key to success rate and completion times. The panel strongly supports the faculty's suggested **revisions of the governance structure**, making it more efficient through streamlining its different bodies, including the Steering Committee. It is imperative, in addition, that doctoral candidates are formally included in decision-making processes.

The evaluation report of VDTR's doctoral students contains complaints regarding experiences of discrimination. The evaluators have taken these complaints seriously and addressed them both in meetings with the doctoral students and with the leadership of VDTR. We recommend that the VDTR put in place and make known **strong structures preventing discrimination and harassment, as well as provide education for supervisors** on the dynamics involved in asymmetrical relationships between PhD student and supervisor.

An **Ombudsman/person of trust should be formally appointed**. This person should be someone who is not involved in day-to-day operations or leadership. Suitable persons for this task could be picked from among emeriti professors, or other professionals with intimate knowledge of the university. It should be defined to which persons within the leadership of VDTR, the participating faculties, and the university the ombudsman reports.

The Self-Evaluation Report notes the need to work on creating a sense of cohort among the PhD students. The evaluators agree with this need, and suggest it may be done through a **revision of admission procedures**. Rather than accepting new students all year around, admission could be organised to happen twice a year (Fall/Winter). This would create formal cohorts, enable a stronger sense of identity, promote informal information flow through student networks, and stimulate informal network-based support structures among students.

Communication is in some respects ineffective. VDTR should work on improving information flow beyond traditional channels, and through information sessions directed towards staff and PhD students. This also concerns the need to educate staff on the structure, organisation, and location of VDTR in the university.

The current budget model and level of funding are not conducive to sustain nor develop the VDTR. The evaluators note, therefore, the need for the university **to consider alternative budget models as well as securing a more sustainable funding level** as the VDTR moves forward.

(2) Partners, stakeholders, networking, internationalisation

The evaluators encourage **future developments involving research schools at other universities**, nationally and internationally. This would provide contexts for further innovation and stimulate expanded networks for PhD students in Europe.

Stakeholders outside the university should be more directly addressed and involved in the education on a regular basis. Such measures are important for capacity building, enhanced transdisciplinarity, and may improve employability.

(3) Supervision, teaching

While a lot of work has been done, the evaluators propose that a process of **professionalization of supervision practices** is initiated. Such an initiative should involve measures related to the training of supervisors, in which commitments and roles are defined and expectations clarified. Questionnaires could be created outlining and defining the respective expectations of supervisor and student, and ‘contracts’ signed, which involve checkpoints along the way. Training of supervisors in the understanding of disciplinary education in interdisciplinary contexts, as well as with interdisciplinarity as such, to maximise the potential of VDTR, is crucial.

Supervisory committees now function more informally. Such structures should be formalised, requiring a minimum of two but preferably three supervisors (a First, Second, and Third reader, as is the practice at many other universities). Such a reform becomes increasingly important as the field turns more interdisciplinary and doctoral candidates need to master a range of methods, theories, and material prevalent within more than one discipline. Furthermore, supervision teams reduce the candidate’s dependency on one higher-ranking person.

The Self-Evaluation Report mentions a number of important educational parts of the programme. The report, as well as discussion at the site visit, have made clear that while VDTR offers an enhancement of the doctoral programme which cannot be found elsewhere, the number of PhD students making use of these offers is lower than could be expected. At the same time, PhD students report that they know about the activities. This suggests that work needs to be done in **securing the relevance – across fields – of the educational components being offered**. The evaluators suggest that more focus in this regard should be placed on a) theory and method, b) digital humanities, and the use of AI in research

and teaching, c) transferrable skills. Such developments require more resources, but are essential to secure the full potential of VDTR.

**Evaluation of the
Faculty of Catholic Theology
University of Vienna**

**AVEPRO REPORT
July 2025**

1. In accordance with university law and the statutes of the University of Vienna, all faculties, centres, and service units undergo periodic evaluations every seven years. These evaluations are prepared and organized by the Unit for Quality Assurance.
 - a) The evaluation process is generally comprehensive, covering the areas of research, teaching, and administration. However, particular focus is placed on key topics identified during the preparation phase:
 - i) **Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” (RaT):** This centre is becoming an increasingly significant influence on the academic and structural development of the faculty. Evaluating its potential and future development opportunities is essential for both the faculty and the broader field of theology and religious studies at the University of Vienna.
 - ii) **Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion (VDTR):** Closely connected to the above topics, the VDTR includes a large number of members from the faculty and plays an important role in shaping its academic profile.

RaT and VDTR have the potential to mutually reinforce one another, highlighting the need for a coordinated development process aligned with shared perspectives. This process has also contributed to strengthening the faculty's profile by giving particular consideration to faculty-specific issues and impacts within the scope of this evaluation.

The Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna conducted a self-evaluation and wrote a detailed self-evaluation report which panel members of the review board received weeks before the site visit. The students' reports were also sent to the peer group.

During the site visit, the evaluation panel met with representatives from the Rectorate, the faculty leadership, the directorate of studies, departments, students, early career researchers, and others. The visit concluded with an oral debriefing session at the Rectorate.

- b) The Panel members were the following:
 - 1) Prof. Dr. Joke van Saane, University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht (Chair)
 - 2) Prof. Dr. Michael Seewald, University of Münster
 - 3) Prof. Dr. Anders Runesson, University of Oslo
 - 4) Mgr Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Agius, University of Malta (AVEPRO)
2. AVEPRO recommended me to focus my attention on two specific elements:
 - i) Faculty activities consistent with the Foreword of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*.

ii) Interdisciplinary activities delivered or planned by the Faculty.

Faculty's mission and vision of evangelisation

The vision and mission of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna is to participate actively in the Church's evangelizing mission. Its robust programmes of studies; formation and education; research projects, outreach with other faculties and universities, and dialogue with society and its socio-cultural and political context; pastoral care and proactive responses to the signs of the times; ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural platforms of dialogue and common projects; and its contribution of academia at university and beyond are all signs of creativity, vitality and interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Moreover, the multitude of initiatives carried out by the Faculty are a clear evidence of bridging creatively and proactively faith and life.

The four criteria outlined by the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*

Given today's new horizon, ecclesiastical studies should reflect key criteria which emerge from Vatican II to offer an effective and relevant service of a missionary Church:

- a) The first and most vital criterion is a contemplative and holistic introduction to the heart of the *kerygma* - the ever-living, compelling message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it continues to unfold in the life of the Church and humanity. The Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna is committed to consolidate its catholic identity without however compromising its openness to dialogue, research and common initiatives with other faculties and universities. Through RaT, the Faculty is showcasing Vienna's rich and diverse religion-related research through a continuous panel titled "*Religion and Socio-Cultural Transformation: Perspectives from Vienna-based Researchers.*" Featuring 49 researchers from seven University of Vienna faculties, as well as other institutions, the panel highlights interdisciplinary and cross-religious perspectives. With its diverse ongoing projects in various disciplines (pastoral theology, social ethics, peace ethics, political ethics, medical ethics, AI ethics, intercultural theological ethics, sustainability, dialogue with Islam), the Faculty is succeeding to preserve its Catholic identity and to establish dialogue with a number of disciplines through its trans-faculty structures (RaT and Doctoral School).
- b) The second key criterion is genuine, wide-ranging dialogue - not as strategy, but as essential to sharing the joy of truth in community. Through its institutions of tertiary education, the Church is called to foster a culture of encounter through open, mutual exchange with all cultures and positive forces that advance universal human understanding. The Faculty of Catholic Theology, through its RaT and the Doctoral School, is pursuing and consolidating continuous dialogue between religions and secular cultures. The dialogue between Christianity, Judaism and Islam is becoming more structured, robust and effective, both on a national and international levels. The consolidation of the university religious research within the RaT across various faculties seeks to address this dialogue with scientifically grounded analyses and to reflect on the solution-oriented contributions religions can make to the changing patterns of society.

The faculty is taking positive steps to foster dialogue between Catholic theology and aesthetics. The dialogue with Orthodox Christianity has been consolidated through the setting up of an associate professorship in this specific area, thereby significantly enriching ecumenical dialogue and discussions. RaT invites regularly academics from different areas and disciplines to participate in workshops and panel discussions to explore and better understand the possibilities for both conflict and dialogue between their disciplines and

religious traditions. Furthermore, focus is put on the organisation of public events at the intersection of religion and society. The convening of international conferences, such as “Parting of the Ways. The Variegated Ways of Separations between Jews and Christians” (2022), jointly organised by the Faculty of Catholic Theology and the Faculty of Protestant Theology, is a case in point of a high-level interreligious dialogue.

- c) The third key criterion is the use of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, guided by wisdom, creativity, and the light of Revelation. Ecclesiastical studies are marked by a commitment to the unity of knowledge - honouring its diverse, interconnected, and complementary forms - both in content and method. The *Self-Evaluation Report 2018-2024* submitted by the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna refers many times to the importance of transdisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and cooperation in teaching and research. The Report specifically refers to Faculty’s support and commitment to implement the vision Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* and the Motu Proprio *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*.
- i. The Interdisciplinary Research Centre *Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* (RaT) brings together religion-related research at the University of Vienna and enhances its international visibility. As a key intellectual hub, RaT serves as an important think tank for the University and contributes meaningfully to the objectives outlined in the University of Vienna Development Plan 2031. Over the years, it has also become a defining element of the Faculty of Catholic Theology’s academic identity.

Within the University of Vienna, RaT functions as a platform for initiating and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between the Faculty of Catholic Theology and other faculties. Through RaT, Catholic Theology gains access to a broad pool of expertise drawn from diverse academic fields, including Religious Studies, Protestant Theology, Islamic Theology, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, Law, Gender Studies, and more.

The Research Centre (RaT) has proactively encouraged and promoted interdisciplinary collaboration, promoted interfaith dialogue, and developed innovative research methodologies to address contemporary societal and ethical challenges. As a result, the Centre’s work stands as one of the faculty’s key contributions toward advancing the vision set forth in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* and the Motu Proprio *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*. *Veritatis Gaudium* advocates for “the establishment of new and qualified centres of research where [...] scholars from different religions and scientific disciplines can interact with responsible freedom and mutual transparency” (VG, Foreword, 5). In alignment with this vision and goal, the Research Centre (RaT) brings together a diverse group of scientists from various fields who collaborate on projects that inherently demand “*interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches*” (VG, Foreword, 4), as emphasized in *Veritatis Gaudium*.

- ii. According to *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, theology is called to engage in a “transdisciplinary dialogue with other scientific, philosophical, humanistic, and artistic fields of knowledge” (ATP, 9). RaT’s emphasis on the transformation of societies and religions aligns closely with the mission entrusted to theology by *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*. Theology, it states, “will have to deal with profound cultural transformations,” recognizing that “what we are experiencing is not simply an era of change, but a change of era” (ATP, 1). This theme is explored in several issues of *JRAT*—for instance, *JRAT* 2/2018, *The Crisis of Representation*, which features contributions from

scholars in theology, Islamic studies, philosophy and pedagogy, economics, and political and social sciences.

- iii. The Research Centre plays a vital role in strengthening the Faculty of Catholic Theology as a space where pressing social issues are critically addressed. In line with the call of *Veritatis Gaudium* to establish “specialized centres of research [...] in order to study the epochal issues affecting humanity today and to offer appropriate and realistic paths for their resolution” (VG, Foreword, 4), RaT is dedicated to engaging with these contemporary challenges. This commitment is reflected in the Centre’s research output, such as *JRAT* 1/2022, *The Illusion of the Obvious: On Truth and Reliability in Times of Crisis*, and *JRAT* 2/2021, *Religion and Disease*, the latter exploring how various religious traditions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. RaT also fulfills the requirement set by *Veritatis Gaudium* for maintaining “scientific periodicals and collections” (VG, Norms of Application, Part One, Art. 2) through its publications: *JRAT*, the *JRAT Supplementa*, and the RaT print book series. Furthermore, RaT’s open access policy reflects its commitment to knowledge equity, ensuring that individuals and institutions without access to costly academic resources are not excluded from participating in scholarly discourse (see VG, Foreword, 4a).
- iv. Since its establishment in 2010, RaT has examined the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between religion and transformative processes in contemporary global contexts. Through its interdisciplinary research, RaT promotes a pluralistic and democratic society by fostering dialogue between diverse religious and secular perspectives and addressing pressing societal issues through critical scholarly inquiry. By encouraging academic exchange and engaging in public discourse, RaT supports democratic values, social cohesion, and mutual understanding in an increasingly diverse world.

Thanks to its non-confessional and interdisciplinary orientation, RaT also plays a pivotal role in strengthening the relationship between the Department of Islamic-Theological Studies and the Faculty of Catholic Theology. It provides a discursive platform for mutual recognition and dialogue between Catholic and Orthodox theology. Moreover, through its support and supervision of doctoral candidates from the Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion (VDTR), RaT reinforces the integration of research and teaching within the faculty.

- v. Both university and Church frameworks recognize the need to reform theological curricula in response to global and societal developments. **Veritatis Gaudium** highlights the evolving “worldwide socio-cultural context,” shaped by a “comprehensive anthropological and socio-ecological crisis” and a profound “change of era,” and thus calls for a “courageous cultural revolution” in education and research. Theological studies are tasked with fostering a culture of leadership amid natural, social, and economic crises, and with offering guidance toward alternative paths for global development. This mission necessitates greater interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and international collaboration in teaching. However, current institutional structures within both the university and the Church pose significant challenges to implementing such reforms. For example, universities often lack structural support for team teaching, while the rigid ECTS credit requirements outlined in the Church’s academic framework leave little flexibility for students to engage in interdisciplinary and international programmes, such as Circle U.
- vi. A case in point to demonstrate the Faculty’s commitment to implement transdisciplinarity is the **MIGRATIONSKOMPASS** project which was developed through a

transdisciplinary process involving researchers from migration studies, refugee counsellors from Caritas, *Diakonie*, and other civil society actors. As part of two research seminars, data was collected on the learning experiences and challenges faced by individuals working in the field—such as teachers, volunteers, and refugee counsellors. These insights formed the foundation for drafting a series of theses aimed at improving coexistence with refugees. The theses were then discussed in an international transdisciplinary workshop attended by 100 experts. Based on these discussions, a list of 100 keywords for an inclusive society was created. This list was further refined in a workshop with practitioners and then condensed and developed into 50 core keywords by a dedicated working group. The result is a set of educational materials that promotes critical reflection and is deeply rooted in practical experience, shaped by the perspectives of those actively engaged in refugee support and integration efforts.

Concluding reflections

1. The faculty demonstrates a strong interdisciplinary character, which is evident in two distinct ways. First, the panel appreciates the interdisciplinarity within the faculty itself. It integrates Catholic theology, orthodox theology, religious studies, Islamic theology, and the social sciences of religion. This breadth of disciplines fosters a unique and holistic approach to the study of religion. Additionally, the faculty collaborates extensively with other institutions within the University of Vienna, further enhancing its interdisciplinary framework.
2. Secondly, the faculty leverages interdisciplinary opportunities in society, particularly benefiting from its unique location in Vienna. This is exemplified by the innovative master's programme *Religion in Europe*, which reflects the faculty's dedication to addressing contemporary societal and cultural needs. The diversity in its study programmes further highlights the faculty's commitment to interdisciplinarity. According to the panel's observations, the faculty has been highly successful in implementing these dual aspects of interdisciplinarity, creating significant advantages for both staff and students.
3. Moreover, the faculty is composed of highly competent and internationally recognized researchers and educators. Its research output is both diverse and impressive, with the journal *JRAT* serving as an inspiring platform for fostering the work of (young) researchers.



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