

NEWS RELEASE

Can religion be defined? UP Religion Studies Head reflects on this question in inaugural address



Professor Jaco Beyers, Head of Religion Studies at the University of Pretoria.

PRETORIA - There is one discipline that is arguably more difficult to define than any other – that of religion. So problematic is the question, that [Professor Jaco Beyers](#), Head of [Religion Studies](#) at the University of Pretoria (UP), posed the following question during his professorial inaugural address: “Are we the only department in this university that cannot define exactly what we are studying?”

It turned out to be a rhetorical question. Prof Beyers’ inaugural address demonstrated that while religion is challenging to define, a solid working definition underpins his research and understanding of the discipline. Before offering his definition of religion to the intrigued audience who sat in the Senate Hall, Prof Beyers outlined why religion is so challenging to define.

Who is asking?

“When we ask what religion is, it depends on who we’re asking,” said Prof Beyers, who was introduced by [Prof Francis Petersen](#), UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal, while [Prof Rantoa Letšosa](#), Dean of the [Faculty of Theology and Religion](#), presided over the event.

Prof Beyers then offered a sociological perspective, where religion is viewed as our attempt to explain our surroundings, often linking the unexplainable to the work of the supernatural. This process could be called “mystifying” the world by “making gods inhabit the universe.”

“However, when we find more scientific explanations for our surroundings, the world becomes demystified and devoid of gods,” Prof Beyers said.

On the other hand, proponents of a psychological perspective on religion, would argue that fear – particularly the fear of dying – is the reason humans gravitate towards religion. According to this perspective, “our fears drive us to postulate images of powerful beings who will guide and protect us”, Prof Beyers said, adding that others, such as psychologist Sigmund Freud, affirmed the role of religion as a coping mechanism to deal with neurosis.

The philosophical perspective offers another view on why people need religion, with philosophers like Immanuel Kant perceiving it as a reaction to “the suspicion that there might be a powerful judge-like figure looking down on all human beings, recording their good and evil actions”, Prof Beyers explained.

Meanwhile, the theological perspective considers that people become aware of the existence of something greater than themselves through intuition or a sense that goes beyond the five senses, he added.

“Once we are aware of this something that is greater than ourselves, we grow dependent on this being, leading to religion.”

A further dimension of the definability – or indefinability – of religion considers theories that emphasise the sacred, supernatural or divine (substantive theories) versus those that focus on what religion does to and for society (functional theories).

At this point in his address, Prof Beyers put forward his preferred definition of religion, based on the work of German theologian Theo Sundermeier, who received an honorary doctorate from UP in 2016.

“Religion is the communal answer to becoming aware of the existence of the transcendental,” Prof Beyers said. “It is expressed in rituals and ethics.”

What is notable about this definition is that while religion is a human initiative, humans did not create or invent the transcendental.

“That existed independently,” Prof Beyers explained. “We cannot prove the existence of the transcendental, as it is a matter of faith. We did not invent the transcendental; we only discovered it.”

This is why religion can be compared to an “empty box.”

“It is agreed that something outside of ourselves is considered more powerful than we are. It remains obscure and mysterious, and is referred to by many names... Different traditions fill this space with different concepts,” he said, adding that the “empty box” can be filled in the different ways that religious traditions prefer.

Theology versus religion studies

Prof Beyers then turned to the relationship between religion studies and theology, highlighting similarities and differences.

A key difference is that religion studies takes an academic approach, focusing on describing and analysing religious phenomena rather than advocating for particular religious views or truth claims.

“Regarding the question of the truth, theology is convinced that its assertions are true, whereas religion studies does not require a belief that its assertions are the truth.”

Prof Beyers then questioned whether it is possible for a theologian to practise religion studies. His own view is that theology can be integrated with religious studies through what he calls a “shy embrace.”

“Shy because there is an awareness that the two disciplines will never merge completely,” he said. “They will remain, to some extent, as strangers to each other. One remains shy of a stranger. But there’s still an embrace, showing a respect for the distance and proximity of the two disciplines.”

While there would inevitably be creative tension between religion studies and theology (because they could never merge), the tension in the polarity maintains the balance.

“In this tension, it is possible to reach creative answers and responses. An embrace can bring about new and unique perspectives. This is how I feel the relationship between religion studies and theology should exist at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at UP.”

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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