



IDEA BOOK

Posters for Promoting
the Academic Study of Religion



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2020 Tom Robinson

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IDEA BOOK:
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the Academic Study of Religion

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What is the study of religion all about?

We have all experienced it—often from students and all too often from our colleagues in other departments—a misunderstanding of what Religious Studies and Religion departments are all about. We probably all have at least a handful of funny stories of such misconceptions. The simple fact is that we study religion in the same way that professors in Political Science departments study the political nature and structures of human societies and that professors in Biology study frogs (among other things). Indeed, depending on our specialized interests, we may be doing the same kind of work as our colleagues in History departments, or Anthropology, or Sociology, or various other disciplines.

Given misunderstandings about what the academic study of religion is all about, I thought I might confront some of these misunderstandings in a poster campaign for our department. The following is a collection of posters that grew out of that initial effort. I hope other departments of religion can benefit from this work. This collection of posters is offered as one way to provoke conversations about the study of religion and to correct some of the misconceptions.

You have permission to use these poster ideas to promote your department and the study of religion generally. These posters are of sufficient resolution to provide an eye-catching image when printed on a colour printer and particularly when printed on glossy paper.

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The IDEA BOOK is available in pdf format. This makes it easy to print from the file. See instructions on the next page.

Four posters appear to be duplicates. They are not. Slight changes have been made to the text to accommodate the labels used for departments studying religion, the two most common being **Religion** and **Religious Studies**. All other posters use more generic phrasing.

I have benefited in the process from comments of colleagues and staff in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Lethbridge. I thank them for their interest and ideas.

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Information and Instructions

If you are viewing this book in **ePUB** format,
please download the **pdf** version of the **IDEA BOOK**
for easy printing of the posters.
Available at: www.robinest.org

FONTS: Arial and Arial Narrow fonts have been used. Such fonts (or a reasonable substitute) are standard on most computers.

USING AN OFFICE PRINTER

BASIC:

Simply select a page from the IDEA BOOK posters and then access your printer as you would do for any print job.

PUT MORE PUNCH IN THE POSTERS:

All the posters feature a high-resolution image done by professional photographers. For eye-popping results, do the following two things:

- (1) Set your printer to the highest quality print setting.
- (2) Use glossy paper.

OR USE A PRINTSHOP OR OFFICE SUPPLY STORE

Are you allergic to the study of peanuts?



Unlikely.

**Think you might be allergic to the study of religion? Equally unlikely.
Peanuts and religion are part of the world we live in.
Whatever your reaction to either,
knowing more about them will do you no harm.**

**[Warning: We have heard second-hand reports
of students who are allergic to the study of statistics.]**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Can't start the day without your coffee?

Throughout history, from shadowy antiquity to the neighbour next door, millions of people can't start their day without some kind of religious activity: from praying, ritual washing, or meditating to reading their sacred scriptures.

For them, religion is a necessary component of life.
(Some, though, need their coffee first.)

Why not learn something about the religious activities that happen each morning throughout the world while drinking your coffee in a class about religion?



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

What's the difference between Biology and Religious Studies?



Religious Studies doesn't dissect its subjects —
at least, not with a scalpel!

But we do examine our subjects closely,
dissecting their literature, rituals, beliefs, behaviours, history, structure, art —
their whole world.

Learn how to dissect without a scalpel.
Frogs will thank you.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

What's the difference between a Biology department and a Religion department?



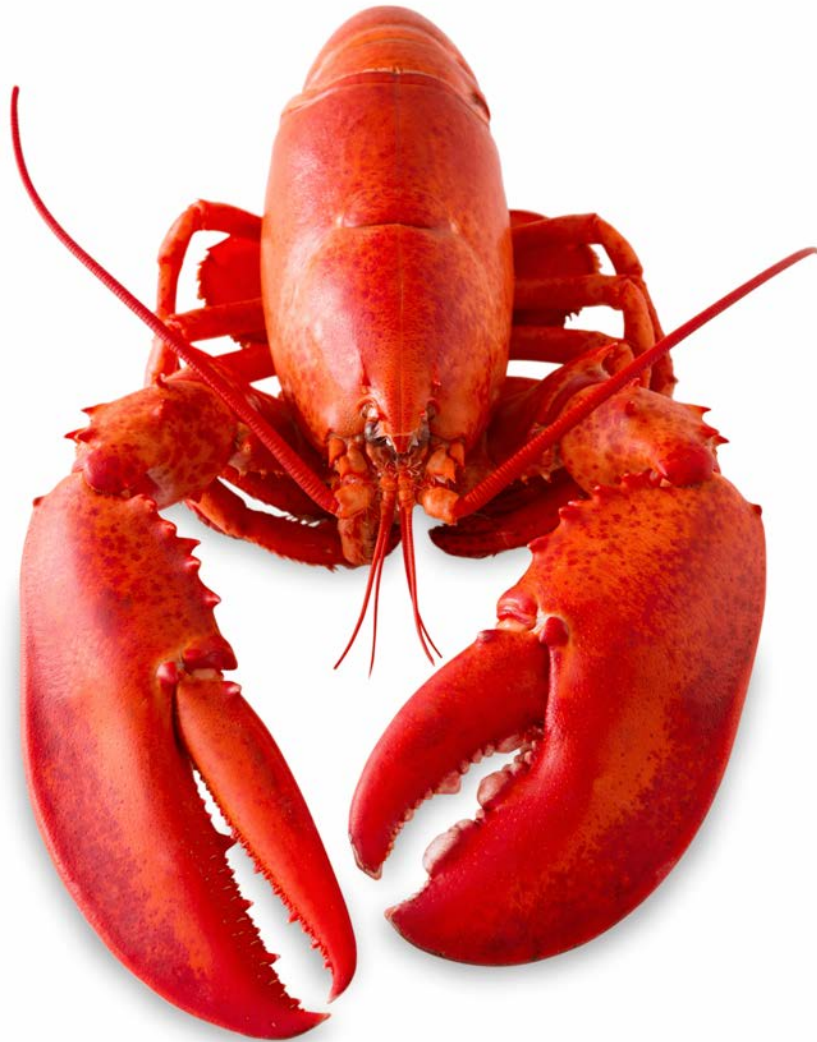
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Frogs will thank you.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not eat lobster.



**To understand people and their cultures, we need to understand
not what we take seriously but what they do.
A society's religion and its rules are often taken very seriously.
Take a course about religion and learn about lobsters.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Can a hand puppet truly be happy?

Or can humans if they don't have free will?

A religion course will not solve the problem of fate and freedom, but it may help you understand why people turn to things like horoscopes, talismans, and good luck charms for security and why people appeal to explanations such as karma or predestination in face of apparent inequities in the world.



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Religion: beneficial, benign, or bad?



**That question can be debated.
What can't be debated is the importance of understanding the role of religion
if we want to understand how humans understand their world.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Made it to the top?

Ever wonder about the motivation of those trying to make it to the bottom?



Rather than a quest for wealth, fame, love, and power, millions of people embrace poverty, obscurity, celibacy, and asceticism as the most fulfilling goal of life. Learn about those you might meet going up going down. And what they claim to find at the bottom.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Afraid of black cats? You should be!



**If you're a mouse.
And, then, maybe you shouldn't focus too much on the colour.
But why are some people afraid of black cats?
Learn about some of the mysteries of how humans perceive their world.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

**Want to study biology
but afraid it might turn you
into a frog?**



Don't worry. It won't.

**Nor will taking a course about religion make you religious.
But it will help you understand the religious aspect
that has marked humans from antiquity to the present.
And that is nothing to be afraid of
— unless you have experienced some slight metamorphosis
and an increasing desire for water and lily pads in your biology class.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Any difference? Of course! One has stripes.

**That often is the level of knowledge about the differences between religions.
You can tell them apart if their adherents wear something different.**

Religion has an inside too.

It determines how people think about the world and how they act in it.

Want to know why people dress they way they do?

You need to look on the inside then.



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Can't tell the difference between one zebra and another?

Or between one religion and another?

The Religious Studies Department examines all the major religions in depth. Learn something about the religious aspect of the world in all its dimensions. And unlike zebras, it's not all black and white.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Which does not belong?

The bunny?

Well, it depends on the context of the question.

If the question is about baby animals, then the bunny belongs.

If the question is about brown animals, then the bunny belongs.

If the question is about animals with one white paw, then the bunny belongs.

**If the question is about animals that are not looking straight ahead,
then the bunny belongs.**

**If the question is which animals are wrongly identified as not belonging,
then the bunny belongs.**

**Want to get a more nuanced context for religious questions?
Try a religion course.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Billions of people won't eat bugs.



**About the same number won't eat bacon.
We don't explore why people don't eat bugs
(especially since one of our professors does eat them).
We do explore why some people won't eat bacon.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Want a different perspective?

It's not always a simple matter to see things from the perspective of someone else. That can be particularly true of trying to understand religious behaviour and belief.

Religion courses offer a relatively safe environment for exploring the religious dimension of humans from antiquity to the present.

[Note: if you see a crow standing on a fox's head, the fox, at least, is probably stuffed, and you are likely near the biology department.]



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Didn't know that elephants had trunks?



**Perhaps more than one perspective would have helped.
Seeing religion only from the back end?
Why not look at religion in an academic context?
We look at both ends and everything in between.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

We don't market religion.



We study it.
**Learn about religious belief and behaviour from antiquity to the present
in an academic context**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

**Birds don't pay taxes.
They do die though.**



**“The only two certainties in life are death and taxes.”
Funny as a one-liner, but pretty serious business otherwise.
Religious traditions understand death in strikingly different ways,
but they all take the matter of death seriously.
Learn how people live their lives in light of how they think about death.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Scared of Religion?

That's understandable.
Scared of studying religion?
That's another matter.



Try a course about religion.
We won't help you find God, or find religion, or find yourself.
We won't help you find the devil either.
We will help you understand people and their religious sensibilities
from ancient societies to the present.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Ever watch a cat?

A cat can be quite funny.
Ever wash a cat?
Now that's another matter.
They prefer to wash themselves.



Keeping clean in a dirty world is a concern of most critters.
But billions of people bathe not to get rid of the dirt on their bodies
but to remove the pollution of their inner self.
Some do it daily. Some once in a lifetime.

Learn how people live their lives in light of how they understand
what pollutes and what cleanses.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Baffled by human behaviour?



Imagine how baffled people can be about human **religious** behaviour.
Want to understand why religious people behave and believe as they do?
The Religious Studies Department examines the major religions of the world
in an effort to understand the complexities of human perception and action.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

The chicken or the egg?



Which came first?

**You won't find an answer to that question in a Religion class,
but you will learn how different cultures have pondered the question of origins
and have expressed their vision in myth and ritual.**

**And you will learn how reflection on origins is profoundly connected
to questions of purpose and value
and questions of death and future existence.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

What scares you in the night?



Ghosts, zombies, demons, the devil, or simply the darkness itself?

**A course about religion will not make you sleep better,
but it may help you understand the kinds of things
that have frightened people through the ages
and the ways groups have tried to deal with their sense of unease.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

You don't need yoga pants.

At least, you don't need them to take a course on Yoga
in the Religion Department.



Did you know that Religion departments do not teach you how to be religious or how to do religious things? Our courses are designed to explore the religious dimension of human life as expressed from antiquity to the present, just as courses in other departments might explore other dimensions of human experience and expression. You don't need to wear a toga to study Roman history. You don't need to wear a beret to study French culture. And you don't need to wear yoga pants to study yoga from the perspective of an academic study of religion.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

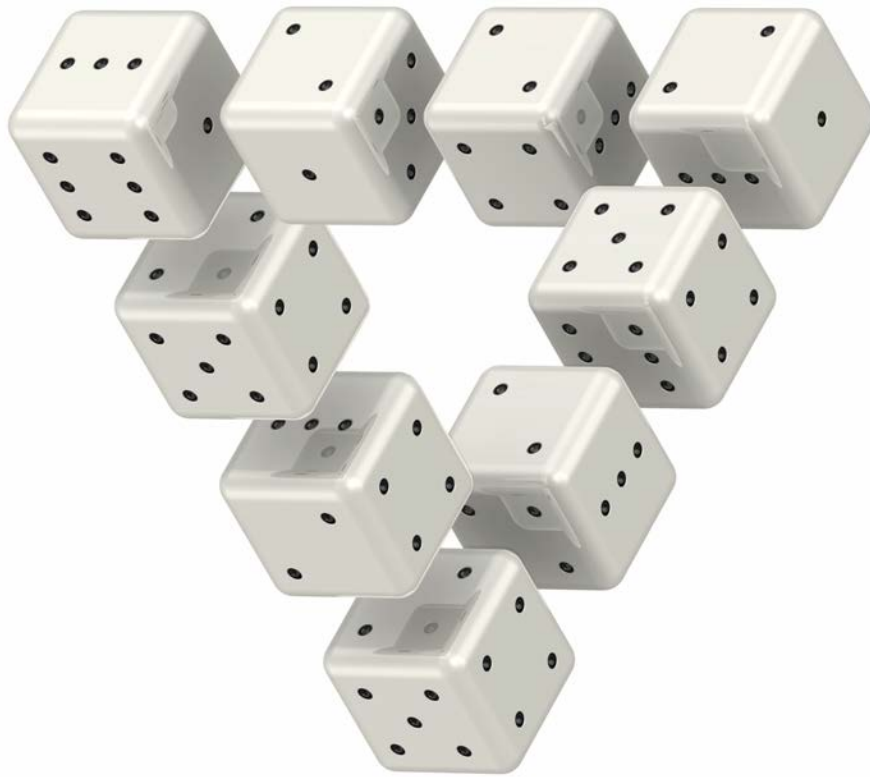
They're both cute and they're both bears.



But one bear is more bear than the other.
And it's not the one that will sit quietly on a shelf.
In the Religion class,
we look at religion that does not sit quietly on a shelf —
religion that is an active force throughout history.
Sometimes it cuddles.
And sometimes it bites.
In doing either, it usually leaves its marks.
Interested in bite marks?

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Things are not always as they appear to be.



**And sometimes things may never make sense.
But a Religion course can help you understand how religion has shaped
human perception of the world from antiquity to the present.**

Can you find a religious symbol in the illustration?

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

The egg was this big. Really.



**Sometimes it helps to have an outside perspective on things.
Religion departments examine religion
as a prominent aspect of humans' perception of the world.
But they do it from an outsider's stance.
A political scientist is not a politician.
A biologist does not transmute into a frog.
A mathematician is not an odd number (well, that might be up for debate).
A historian is not necessarily old.**

And a religion professor is not a priest or a part-time shaman.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

We don't teach you how to become an atheist.

Or an agnostic. Or a religious person.



But we do explore religion, a dominant aspect of how humans have related to their world from antiquity to the present. And that kind of study can be done by atheists, or agnostics, or religious people. But we can't teach you how to become an atheist, or an agnostic, or a religious person. If you come to us for that, you are on the wrong bus.

**Religious Studies:
Understand your world
better.**

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On top but still a turkey?

It happens.

Religion courses examine how religious traditions determine success
and how they determine failure.

How they view the top and how they view the turkey.
Want to understand how people act in the way they do?

Learn something about how they define their top.
And something about how they define their turkey.



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Know how the earth originated?



Pretty certain that it was not in some cosmic bird nest?
Or on the back of a giant turtle?
Or some other myth of origins that cultures might cling to?
To understand a culture, it is necessary to understand its myths.
Myths are not just some quaint stories.
Myths are foundational blocks
for understanding the world and one's place in it.
Want to understand how other people see the world.
Understand their myths.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Can a rabbit be religious?

If only it knew enough to close its eyes when praying.

Billions of humans pray every day.

Some pray five times a day. Every day.

Some pray standing. Some pray kneeling. Some pray in ritual movement.

Some pray silently. Some pray in audible chant.

And most—but not all—pray with their eyes closed.

Learn about what billions of people do every day.

And, perhaps, the occasional rabbit.



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Religion poisons everything?



Maybe.

**Yet religion has been a dominant aspect of the human species
as far back as we can probe.**

Why is that? How has it affected humans?

Has it brought only harm and never help?

**And even supposing religion,
wouldn't it help to understand it better?**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Feel that the world is upside down — and you're not in Australia?



That is a common feeling.
Religions often address the feeling that something is not quite right.
That something has gone amiss.
That Eden has been lost.
That Pandora's box has been opened.

How that situation is to be controlled, reversed, or erased
is often at the heart of religious interest.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Are owls ever happy?

**Some questions can't be answered
by a quick look.**

Religion often gets the “quick-look” treatment.

Does a phenomenon that has been a dominant shaper of attitudes and action from ancient times to the present not require more?

Religion courses examine in detail the religious aspect of humans from a variety of perspectives in order to understand human belief and behaviour from antiquity to the present.

[Note: We usually study only humans, and then only in their religious context— but we would look at the occasional owl if some society makes religious use of them.]



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.



Over 1 billion people won't eat beef. Nearly 2 billion people won't eat pork.

Religious behaviour often is reflected in how and what people eat.

**Inviting someone to dinner but no knowing which dietary taboos
might be important to your guests?
Then take a Religion course.
Or choose chicken.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Hey! Think you understand otters?



**They're not humans, you know!
And you can't understand them by thinking that they are.
Trying to understand something without studying it
will likely lead to misconceptions.**

**That is true for any field.
Even religion.
And, of course, otters.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

I am not a monkey!

Not all primates are monkeys,
even if they all like bananas.

Grouping all primates together on the basis of something like a banana
and then thinking you understand primates
is like grouping all religious traditions together
on the basis of something like prayer
and thinking you understand religion.

Understand the details.
Take a Religion course.



Religious Studies:
Understand your
world better.

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Curiosity killed the cat. For humans, the danger is not so great.

Most of our ancestors and most of our neighbours have lived their lives and sensed their place in the scheme of things under the influence of religion.

Being curious about this aspect of human behaviour will help you understand better how and why peoples past and present have acted in the ways they have.

And this won't kill you.

It won't even hurt you.

**And it won't make you religious,
any more than studying biology will make you a frog
or studying French will make you a chef.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Ever kiss a hippo?

It's probably not recommended unless you are another hippo.
But that doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't study them.

Not interested in getting that close to religion?
That doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't study religion.
Religion has shaped human belief and behaviour for thousands of years.

Want to understand humans better?
Why not study religion in an academic context?



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Are we but puppets on a string?

Are we but the playthings of fate?
Are we but actors in some kind of divine comedy?
How can we be held responsible when we control so little?

Questions of predestination and determinism,
of free will and human responsibility, drive much of human reflection,
whether clothed in the garb of theology or of philosophy.

Religion courses won't answer that question
but we will probe how religious traditions have answered it,
and give all arguments a good shaking...

...unless we are made to do otherwise.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

How dangerous is it to talk about religion?



**Far less dangerous than a conversation between a crow and a cat.
Religion is an aspect of human behaviour from antiquity to the present.
Trying to understand why people behave in the way they do
may require some conversation about religion.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Need a shortcut to your morning cup of coffee?
Just chew the beans!



What? Not the same thing?

There is no shortcut to understanding something as diverse and complex as religion, reflected in hundreds of cultures over thousands of years.

But Religion courses do offer a fairly direct path to a nuanced understanding of religion in our world.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

This little piggy went to market.

And he didn't come home.

Who is to blame?

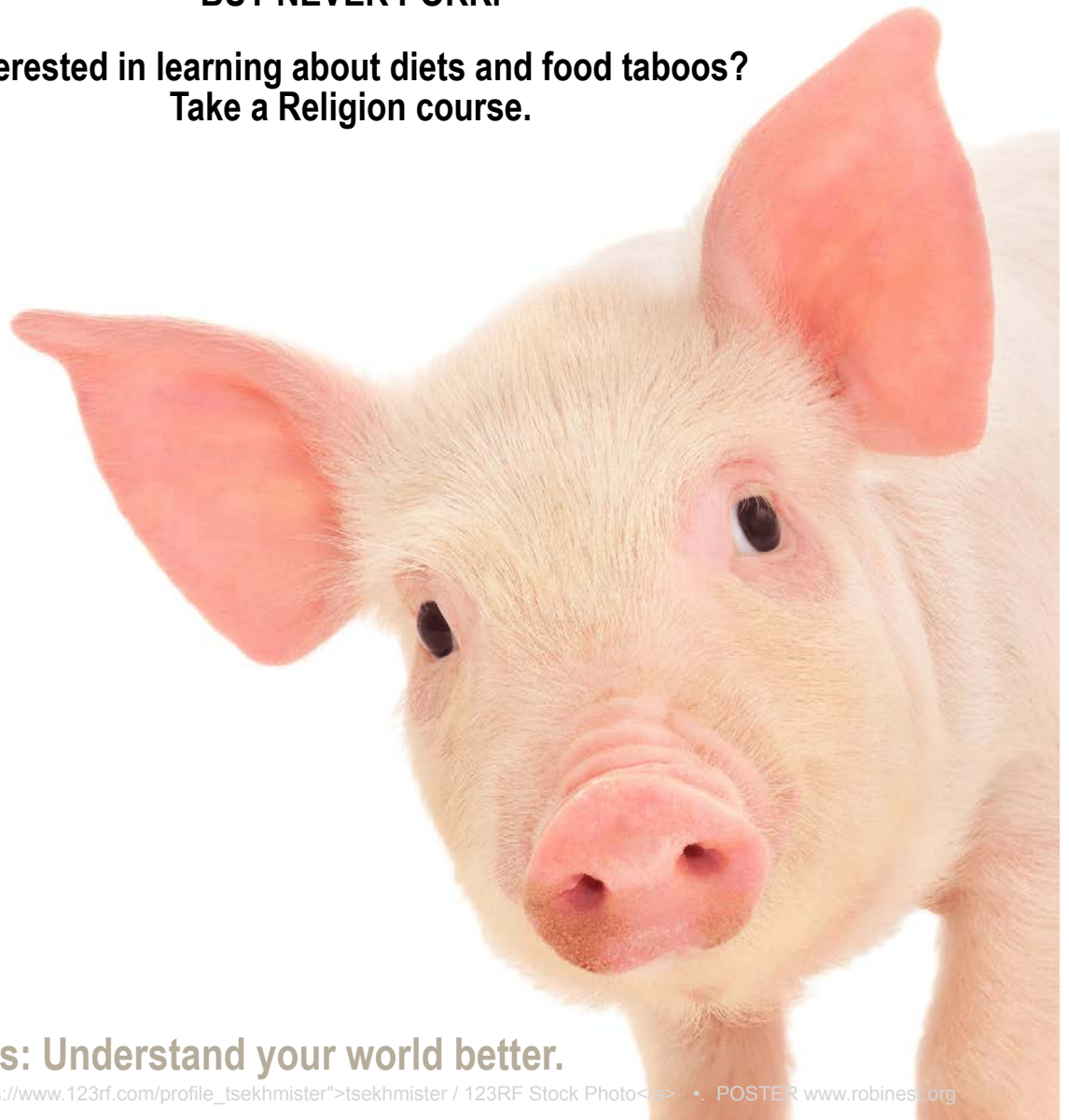
**Certainly not vegetarians and vegans. That's obvious.
Certainly not Jews or Muslims, but that's not so obvious.**

**Jews and Muslims not only eat meat—
but on occasion are expected to eat meat.**

**The Jewish Passover meal has meat.
The Muslim Eid al-Fitr feast at the end of the Hajj has meat.**

BUT NEVER PORK.

**Interested in learning about diets and food taboos?
Take a Religion course.**



Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Don't put pork on your fork!

More than three billion people **don't** eat pork.
About two billion people **won't** eat pork.

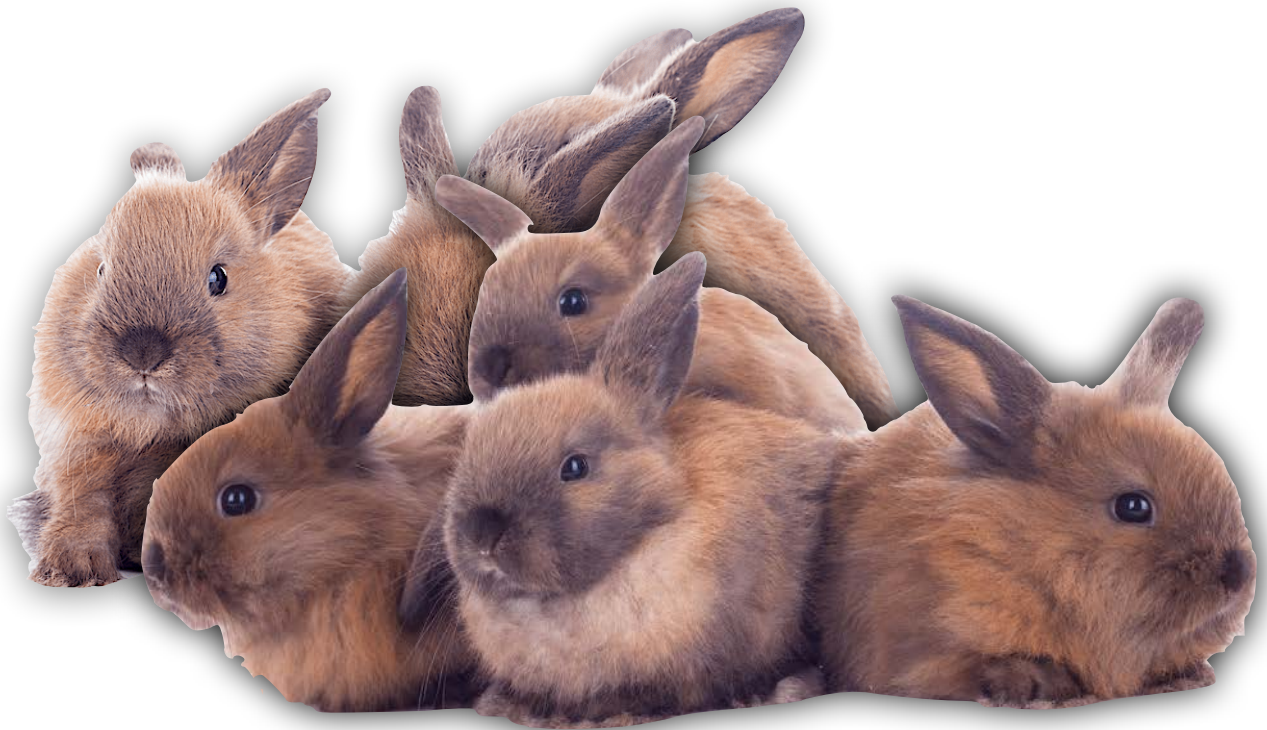
Don't and **won't** are not the same thing.
In a Religion class,
we **don't** study people who **don't** eat pork;
we study people who **won't** eat pork.

Learn about religious food taboos.
It **won't** prevent you from enjoying your breakfast sausages.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

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Rabbits are not noted for celibacy.



**Humans sometimes are, even making it the ideal.
Why do some religious traditions promote celibacy?
Why do some encourage marriage and large families?
And why do some idealize both?**

**Religion and sex.
Thought they never went together?**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Dogs don't understand cats.

[Even cats don't understand cats.]



Humans have much the same problem.
They often don't understand their neighbours.
The only school a dog gets to go to is obedience school.
There are no courses about cats for dogs to take.
But there are plenty of courses humans can take to understand other humans.
Like Religion courses.
We explore how religion affects the way
that people eat, dress, and live their daily lives,
and whether they like cats and dogs — or NOT!

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Worried?



**Most people worry.
Sometimes it is over basic needs:
food, shelter, health, employment.
Sometimes it is over relationships.
Sometimes it is over the general uncertainties of life.**

**Religion usually has ways to alleviate worry —
and sometimes to cause it!**

**Religion courses won't alleviate your worries,
but you will learn why other people worry and how they handle it.
[Sorry. Dogs are on their own.]**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Tracing your ancestry?

We are pretty sure that humans didn't start out as artist mannequins!

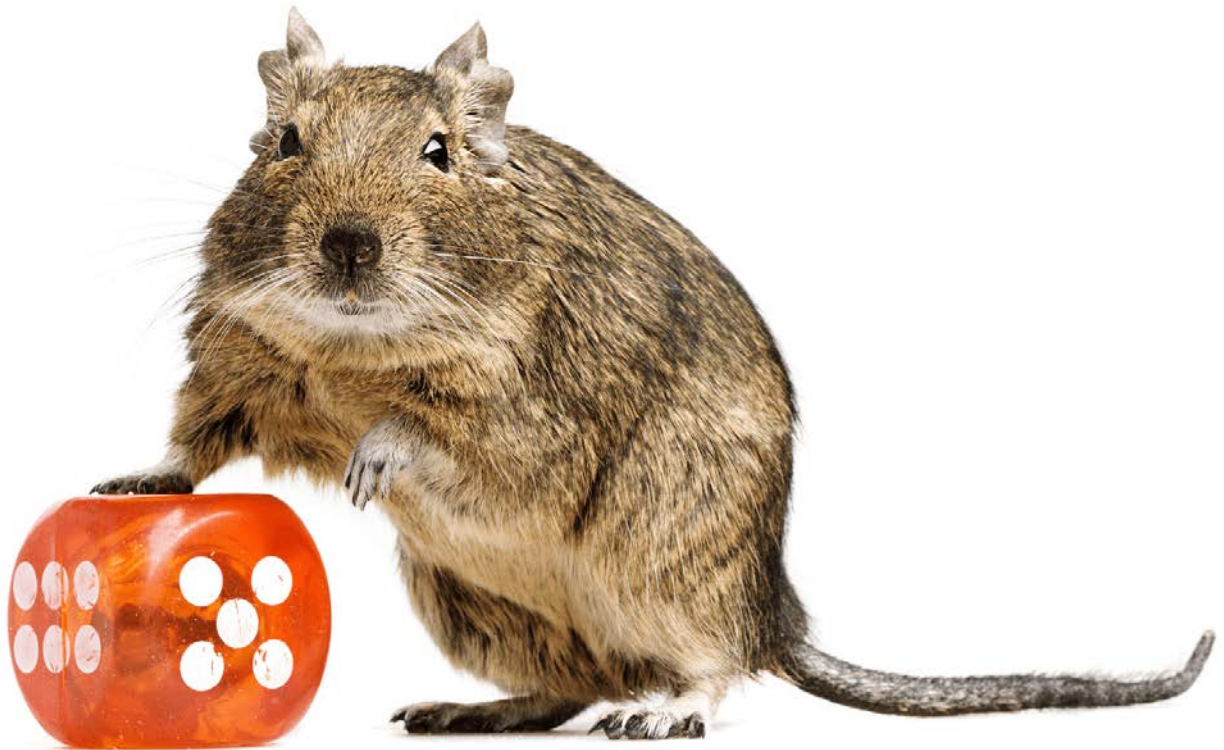


Religions usually offer a story of the origin of humans.
Such stories may sound silly,
but they are not intended to tell us what humans were like then
but what humans should be like NOW.

Learn how to read ancient literature.
Take a Religion course.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Need to roll a seven with a six-sided dice?



**Life can be baffling.
The questions don't come with the answers.**

**Our religion courses won't make your life less baffling,
but they will make the behaviour of others less baffling.
[We haven't tried making seven-sided dice,
but our initial sense is that most problems are bigger than that.]**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Don't blame everything on religion.



**There are bad players everywhere.
Always looking for a chance to stir up trouble.
Given the importance that religion has in many societies,
religion is a convenient cause to rally around.
And sometimes religion seems to be the only cause.**

Religion courses look at the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**[Sorry: we have no idea why cats can be such bad actors at times.
It is widely believed that even cats themselves don't know.]**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

We all live in boxes.



**We sometimes venture beyond our box.
Sometimes we explore other people's boxes.
Why not explore the boxes that billions of people today live in—
the religious boxes.**

**Take a Religion course.
We don't live in religious boxes—
we study people who do.**

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Old McDonald had a farm.



So do most religions.

Animals often are featured in religious legends.

Some animals are treated as gods (Ganesha, the elephant god of Hinduism).

Some as devils (the snake in the Garden of Eden).

Some are treated as sacred (the dairy cows of India).

Some are treated as polluting (pigs in Islam and Judaism).

On McDonald's farm, there were cows, and pigs, and goats, and things.

Most religions need bigger barns.

Learn about animals without getting mud on your shoes.

Take a Religion course.

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

Cats and mice focus on different things.



**We are interested in what humans focus on.
Almost all societies past and present have focused on religion
to a greater or lesser degree.
Our religion courses focus on people focusing on religion.
They focus on their “cheese” and we focus on their focus on “cheese.”**

[Note: The story of cats and mice and cheese has another chapter.
It is here that the analogy with the study of religion, fortunately, breaks down.]

Religious Studies: Understand your world better.

You don't know everything. And you don't need to know everything.

**You don't even need to know that the illustration here
is of the common housefly.**

But why not know more about the world you live in?

**Religion courses put religion under the microscope.
You would be surprised at what you can see.**



**Religious Studies:
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