

### **Information for Potential Students and Other Interested Persons**

- The Religious Studies (Orthodox Christianity) programme at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Erfurt, within the broader context of Cultural Studies, focuses on the history of Orthodox Christianity from the time of early Christian congregations and the articulation of Christian Orthodoxy in Byzantium until the formation of various Orthodox Churches in modern times and the Orthodox presence in the contemporary global environment.
- Among other things, it focuses on the development of theology and ecclesiastical structures, the plurality of practices, worldviews and orientations, as well as the social activities and cultural impact of Orthodox Christianity in various local contexts, both historically and geographically.
- The Orthodox cultures of Eastern and South Eastern Europe occupy a central place in this programme of study, particularly the two main traditions of Byzantine (Greek) and Slavic (especially Russian) Orthodoxy, including the various Orthodox traditions in the Balkans (especially of Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria).
- From the point of view of Religious Studies, the phenomenon of Christian Orthodoxy is examined “from the outside,” i.e., with a distanced, value-neutral perspective and critical approach, without confessional or ecclesiastical objectives and undertones, distinguishing this programme of study from academic Christian theology.
- Orthodox Christianity is regarded as one important factor accounting for the cultural and social specificity of many predominantly Orthodox cultures in Eastern and South Eastern Europe. The interactions between Orthodoxy, society and culture, as well as intercultural comparisons—both between different Orthodox cultures and between Orthodox, on the one hand, and Western cultures on the other—constitute an important focus of this programme of study.
- Given that Orthodox Christianity increasingly came into contact and, occasionally, into conflict with the secular sphere since the advent of modernity, special attention is paid to the interactions and conflicts between Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and other socio-cultural domains (politics, philosophy, natural sciences, etc.).
- This programme of study is interdisciplinary in approach, and students are strongly encouraged to participate in classes from other disciplines at the University of Erfurt, such as Slavic Studies, Literary Studies, Philosophy, Linguistics, History, Communication Studies and Social-Political Sciences.
- In order to provide students with the necessary cultural competence for the study of the various Orthodox cultures of Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the University of Erfurt offers language courses in Ancient Greek/Modern Greek and Old Church Slavonic/Russian. In addition, provisions can be made for study and internships abroad, as well as field excursions.
- The Religious Studies (Orthodox Christianity) programme can be studied at the University of Erfurt as a major or as a minor subject. As with all programmes of study within the Faculty of Philosophy, there is an initial Bachelor programme (BA) of 6 semesters, followed by an optional Master’s programme (MA) of 4 semesters. A subsequent doctoral dissertation in the field of Religious Studies (Orthodox Christianity) can be completed within a period of three years. Both the Master’s and the Doctoral programmes are also open to external applicants, including those coming

from disciplines other than Religious Studies.

## Profile

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The Religious Studies (Orthodox Christianity) programme at the University of Erfurt is a novelty in many respects. First, its main emphasis is on a heretofore-rather- marginally treated area of research, and second, it represents a unique disciplinary combination in the German-speaking academic world. The large geographical region, historically characterised by the predominant or influential presence of Orthodox Christianity, has been insufficiently examined from a Religious Studies' point of view so far. Research on this region, which in fact reaches from Siberia in the east to Serbia in the west and from Finland in the north to Greece and Cyprus in the south, has been carried out only cursorily. This region has gained significantly in importance with the socio-political revolutions of the late twentieth century in the former Eastern Bloc, contributing to new interest in the importance of religion including Orthodox Christianity there. The main aim of the Religious Studies (Orthodox Christianity) programme of study at the University of Erfurt is to fill this knowledge gap by putting emphasis on the two main traditions of Byzantine (Greek) and Slavic (especially Russian) Orthodoxy in Europe. Further, it attempts to develop and establish the Religious Studies' approach to the Orthodox Christian world as an autonomous research focus located within the broader perspective of Cultural Studies. Using an interdisciplinary agenda, it seeks thus to provide a distanced and critical view of Orthodox Christianity, as distinct from academic Christian theology's confessionally-oriented and often-apologetic approach.

The first goal of this programme of study is to pass on basic knowledge about the different forms and local traditions of Orthodox Christianity, as well as their common characteristics. The Orthodox world consists of a number of autocephalous and autonomous churches, united and kept together in a conciliar structure traceable to the early Christian Church. The main focus lies on the Eastern and South Eastern European region, where Christian Orthodoxy was initially disseminated and became established. It is no accident, for example, that almost three-quarters of all Orthodox believers today still live in this region. Greek Orthodoxy, from the Byzantine era up to modern Greece, and Russian Orthodoxy, from the baptism of the Kievan Rus' in 988 up to the post-Soviet period, represent the two main focuses of this programme of study. Countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, where the majority of the population belongs to the Orthodox Church, have equally developed their own versions of Orthodoxy and are also taken into consideration. There exist a number of other states in Europe with significant Orthodox minorities, such as Albania, Finland, Poland or the Baltic States, where yet other specifics of Orthodoxy have become tradition. To enable excellent insights into chosen aspects of the wide field of Orthodox Christianity, this programme cooperates with other departments at the University of Erfurt, including the acquisition of language proficiency in Ancient and Modern Greek, as well as in Old Church Slavonic and Russian, and complementary perspectives from related disciplines (e.g., Eastern European History, Slavic Studies and the Social Sciences). Moreover, the presence of Orthodox Christianity in other parts of the world (Orthodox diasporas), from Western Europe and America to the Middle East and Australia, is also taken into account. In the modern, globalized environment, with its plurality of cultural and religious exchanges between nations, states and cultures, academic interest needs to be placed on the increasing international presence and cultural diffusion of Orthodox Christianity beyond its historical heartlands. Additionally, the historical and contemporary marginalisation of Orthodox Christianity in the dominant Western discourses also merits attention and deconstruction.

A second goal of this programme of study is to locate the social and cultural influences of the particular "Orthodox way" of believing, practicing religion, expressing piety and viewing the world. It is about capturing and understanding the various facets of the particular "Orthodox way of life" and the consequences thereof. This may range from related mentalities to specific behavioural patterns. Like every other religion, Orthodox Christianity sets forces in motion that result in a

specific social and cultural order, as well as in respective individual and collective representations. Orthodox Christianity, as a powerful cultural factor of *longue durée* amongst others, can be regarded as a precondition for several current characteristics of the cultures of Eastern and South Eastern Europe (e.g., in its connection with ethnic/national self-consciousness and collective mentality, and in the close church-state relations and the politicization of Orthodoxy). An interdisciplinary approach (with the help of sociology, psychology, ethnology/social anthropology, semiotics, and so on) to examine and bring to light such connections is highly recommended. This will also enable better comparisons with West European developments, for example, regarding the differing development of secularization, de-Christianization and anticlericalism in the Orthodox world, which point to its religious and cultural specificity.

A third aim of this programme of study is to develop comparative skills in many respects. This pertains, for example, to the wider Orthodox world and its historical process of formation. When analyzing the various local Orthodox cultures in their geographical, cultural, linguistic and historical differences, it is also important to keep their commonalities in mind. Therefore, teaching units and research projects that transcend the narrow confines of a single Orthodox culture, while placing emphasis on comparison between two or more Orthodox cultural traditions and/or Churches are especially welcome. Such work will certainly lead towards a better understanding of Orthodox Christianity as a whole and clarify the elements that unite all Orthodox Churches in their various manifestations. Moreover, research into the historical encounters, relations and exchanges between Orthodoxy and the Western Christian traditions of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is of paramount importance, since these have “shaped” the self-consciousness of the Orthodox peoples for many centuries. In addition, Orthodoxy has had its share of contact and even conflict with other religious traditions (including the religions of antiquity and Islam). Minor religious movements as well as the “secular religions” and rationalisms of modernity (including Marxism-Leninism and the worldview of modern science) have equally presented serious challenges to the Orthodox Churches. These encounters merit a more profound treatment in this programme of study, for they show that Orthodox Christianity has been formed in its continuous interaction with other religious, intellectual and socio-cultural complexes, leading to various processes of negation, assimilation or differentiation.

The fourth and final goal of this programme of study is placed within the wider context of the survival of religious and even para-religious (in our case, mostly Orthodox) patterns of thought, practice and expression in non-religious settings. In the context of the long cultural history, it is important to explain the survival of certain, initially religiously inspired categories and structures within secular frames. This helps place cultural phenomena from the period of the Renaissance through modernity to post-modernity within an even larger framework of cultural history encompassing both millennia AD. The main question within this area of teaching and research is whether certain aspects of (post)modern secular culture can be described as “post-religious” in the sense that they grew out of previous religious structures and ideas. Some examples being: meaning-systems of art, science, philosophy and esotericism, everyday rituals, secular cults and political religions, calendar feasts, psychedelic experiences and phraseologisms. Interdisciplinary cooperation between departments at the University of Erfurt, such as with Slavic Studies, Literary Studies, Philosophy, Linguistics, History, Communication Studies and Social-Political Sciences, is an integral part of the research on Orthodox cultures in this context, that, in the end, will pave the way for an approach to Orthodox Christianity that could historically reassess its negative image as a mere obstruction for modern developments. The particular Orthodox ways of “secularization” and “modernization” can thus be described in more differentiated terms.