

## Old wine in new barrels – studying Europe’s religious roots

by Anne Rahbek



*Master's students sightseeing in Rome*

The first batch of students on the Master's programme *Religious Roots of Europe* began their studies on 1 September 2009. The joint Nordic programme has been developed in collaboration between six universities. The 24 students enjoying the first year of the new programme include Mette Juul Vedel and Raket Jacobi, both of whom took the Bachelor programme in Theology at the University of Copenhagen.

### The best of two worlds, in an international framework

Both students first became aware of the new programme during their Bachelor programme at the University of Copenhagen. Mette explains that she chose the programme, among other reasons, because of the international dimension and the opportunity to learn more about Islam: "Even though Christianity constitutes the core of theology as a subject, I also think that it's essential to compare it with other religions, especially since Islam is such an important part of contemporary society."

Raket explains that she sees the programme as a manifestation of the need to build bridges between the disciplines of theology and religious studies, which have previously been characterised by a clash of interests. "Religious studies and theology have not exploited the opportunities each of them affords. Religious studies often takes a rather hostile stance to theology, and *vice versa*. Theology doesn't exploit the opportunities to look at other religions in order to put Christianity into perspective. The new programme places the three religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) on an equal footing and takes them all equally seriously."

### Busy guinea pigs

The two students have had a busy first semester. In September, all the new students gathered for the first time for an academic seminar in Rome. According to Mette, it was a positive but challenging experience: "It was a really good trip, but it was also hard, because we had to work on both the academic and social aspects. We started out with some basic classes because we all come from different academic backgrounds so possess different basic knowledge of the subject matter."

Both students stress that the seminars are essential, partly because so much of the programme consists of self-study and e-learning, but also because it is so demanding.

Raket: "Noses are very much to the grindstone. There's a lot literature to be read and a lot of assignments to be submitted." Mette adds: "The fact that we only have to attend intensive seminars, and are otherwise expected to study for ourselves, also makes it challenging. Demands are really placed on your personal performance."

Raket: "Conversely, I have discovered that the lecturers are highly responsive. We are, of course, guinea pigs on this new programme, and there have been times when we've had to say 'Hold on a moment, this is all too much.' The teachers have taken that on board and made appropriate adjustments." Mette: "The lecturers are well aware that it wasn't possible to make the programme absolutely perfect from the outset. Some sort of adjustment was going to be needed. They are deeply interested in us doing well, being able to keep up, etc." Raket: "They also put a lot of effort into organising dinners in the evening during the seminars, where we can

eat together and get to know each other outside the academic sphere. I think this shows a great deal of commitment on their part."

### **Also the students' responsibility!**

Rakel and Mette agree that the programme places great demands not only on the staff, but also on the students.

Rakel: "It is very important that the students realise the potential inherent in e-based teaching. We have no classrooms in which to spar with our fellow students, so we spend a lot of time studying alone. The e-forum provides an opportunity to upload assignments and papers and generate dialogue. We can say 'I don't agree with you – I think such and such' or 'I hadn't thought of that, now I've changed my mind'. This academic sparring is hugely important for keeping spirits up, and we, as students, also have a responsibility to make it happen. Similarly, we also have to make an active contribution to the seminars, which provide an opportunity to discuss topics face to face."

### **New perspectives – and a new network**

What would you say to those students considering applying for a place on the new Master's programme?

Mette: "You need a good deal of willpower and self-discipline – both because of the nature of the course and the high academic level."

Rakel: "Yes, you have to realise that it involves heavy academic material. This is, after all, the study of religions in their formative years – we don't sit about endlessly discussing 9/11 or the Israel/Palestine conflict all the time!"

Neither Rakel nor Mette is in any doubt that they would recommend the programme:

Rakel: "It puts all three religions into perspective. Learning about other religions' similarities and differences demythologises prejudices about them." Mette adds: "The comparative nature of the programme opens our eyes to some unseen sides of Christianity. The international aspect is also important, as you meet people from other places and have the opportunity to study in other contexts." Rakel: "Yes, and whatever you aim to do afterwards, whether you want to continue in academia or enter business and industry, the programme provides the opportunity to forge valuable contacts."

I conclude by asking the two students what they expect from the next semester. Mette replies that she is looking forward to both the social and the academic aspects. In particular, she is very much looking forward to the course on the role of women in the three religions. Rakel rounds off: "The topic of Apologetics and Conversion in the three religions sounds interesting, but in general, the range of subjects is so fantastic you can only rejoice." She adds, smiling: "In fact, I don't really understand why more people haven't applied yet!"