

EARS in 2021



Annual report



EARS is a European network of faculties and departments of Theology and Religious Studies. We aim to make religious knowledge visible to society and relevant to the public domain, thereby bridging the gap between academia and society. We use various instruments to do so, including a dashboard, website, social media, round tables, and conferences - all supported by an international team of analysts.

EARS operates based on five focus points. They strengthen each other and are intertwined. The five pillars jointly lead to our key results.



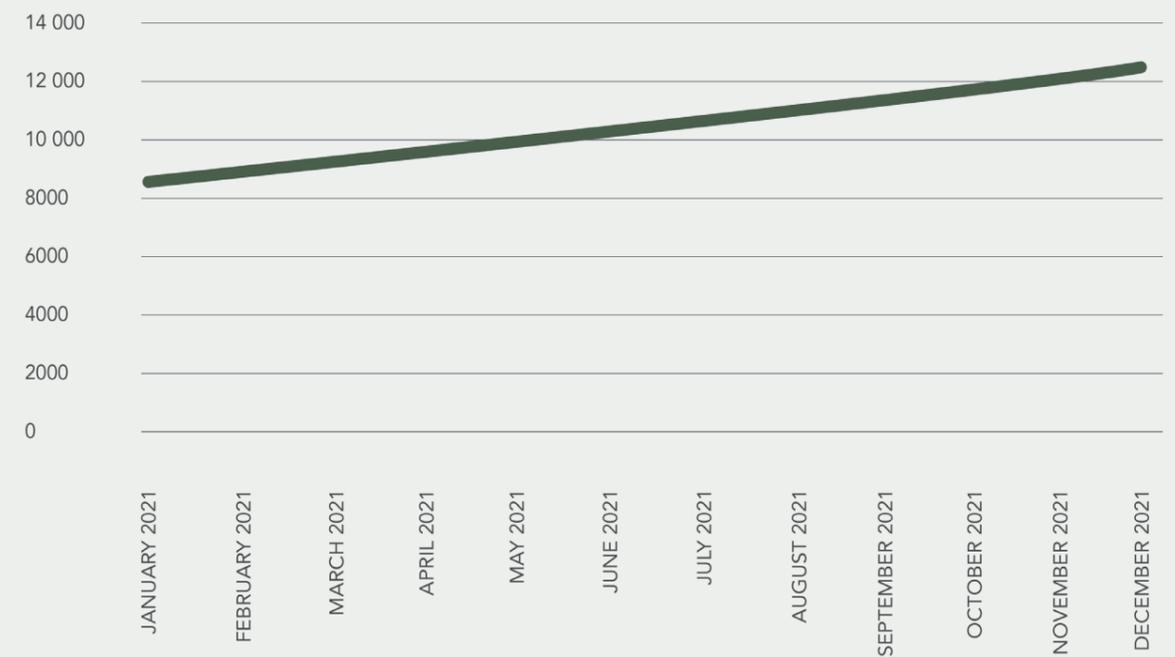
I. Insights

The EARS dashboard (www.earsdashboard.com) is a database of summarised articles published in leading European media across 25+ countries. The dashboard shows the importance of religion in the public domain and enables users to gain new insights into religion and society.

Results 2021: In 2021, we added 4,111 summaries to the dashboard, an average of 343 each month. These regular contributions to the dashboard enable us to maintain a database that includes many developments on religion and society from the European news. In addition, since all articles are summarised in English, EARS contributes to making this critical knowledge widely available.

Looking at 2022: We launched a new version of the dashboard in the spring of 2022. With an updated design and new functionalities, this dashboard will better satisfy users' needs and provide new insights into religion and society with updated graphs and tools. During the year, we aim to maintain a steady stream of added summaries from across Europe.

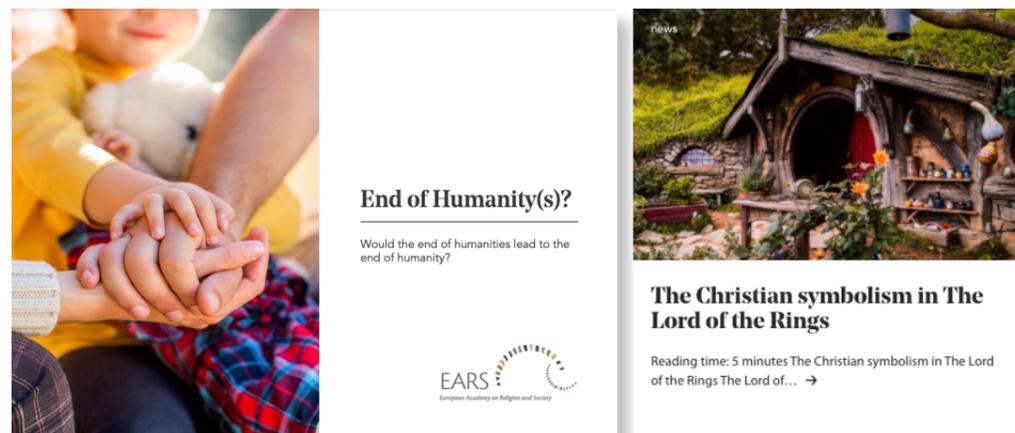
Summaries on the EARS dashboard



II. Publications

Over 20 analysts from more than 15 countries write articles about current issues regarding religion and society. In addition, they write whitepapers, weekly comments with their own analysis, and dossiers on larger topics at a European level. All articles and other documents are published on the EARS website (www.ears.eu) and on Facebook and LinkedIn. We have taken a number of actions to enlarge our reach throughout the year. These include the regular publication of articles, but also the use of paid promotions on Facebook and LinkedIn to generate a larger audience.

Results 2021: In 2021, we published 170 original articles and 47 weekly comments. In addition, we published 4 whitepapers based on our round tables on the topics of Artificial Intelligence, Interest and Morality, Politics of Education, and End of Humanity(s). Finally, 2 dossiers were published, in which analysts analyse a trend or development from the perspective of their native country. These dossiers covered the topics of Education and Religion in Europe and Normativity in Europe. Publications from all of 2021 are collected in a book, *Perspectives on 2021*, published in early 2022.



45,000 people visited the EARS website in 2021, compared to 13,000 visitors in 2020. In addition, the number of people following the EARS Facebook page rose from 928 to 6,819 throughout the year. This equals a sevenfold increase in people following the page, and therefore a much larger audience for our publications.

Looking at 2022: In 2022, we will be defining one or two focus topics to centre some of our publications around. This will allow us to truly dive into a specific topic and reach deeper insights. Our attention to such a focus topic will result in articles on the website, but also in a dossier and a whitepaper on the matter. We aim to publish an average of 2-3 new articles or other publications each week. In addition, we aim to create 3-4 whitepapers based on round tables in 2022, and at least one dossier.

Publications & Visitors 2021 in numbers



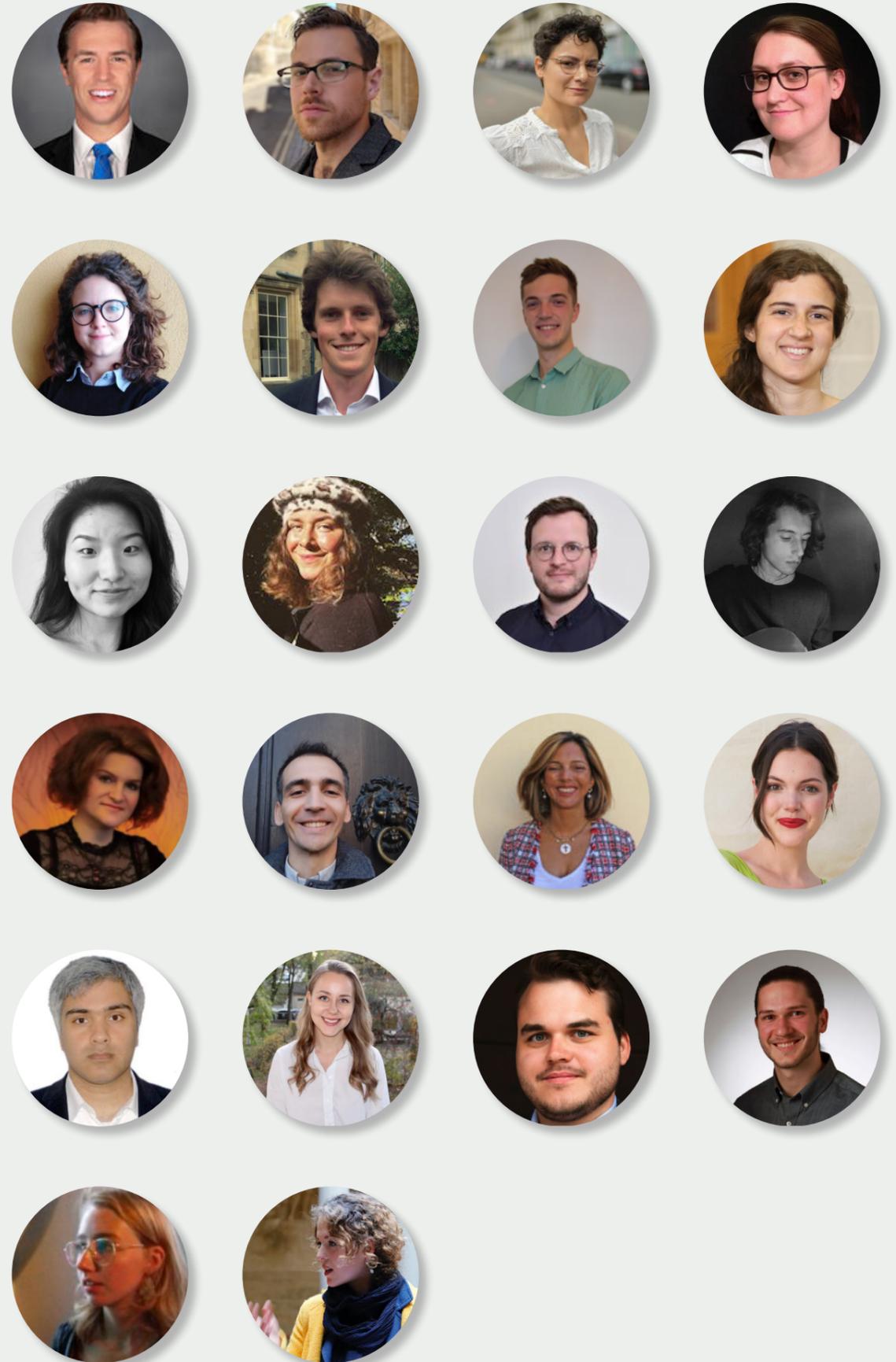
III. Young scholars

An international team of EARS analysts writes the dashboard summaries and website publications. Some of them have a background in theology, others do not. We see that a new generation of theologians is rising: one that feels attracted to theology, but not within the current study. We see it as a goal to attract this younger generation. Therefore, we organised a two-day summer school as a try-out, to see if this generation of scholars is also interested in theological questions.

Results 2021: The fact that young people without a background in theology are interested in theological matters is very stimulating to EARS. It implies that we are able to reach a different target audience than the regular theology student. 23 students participated in the summer school and shared very positive feedback afterwards. In fact, they rated the program with an average of 4.8 out of 5 points. Feedback included:

- "What I like most was discussing such a relevant topic with students and researchers with all sorts of perspectives and backgrounds. They deeply challenged and enriched my own views."
- "The EARS summer school is an excellent programme. I think the EARS summer school is a good opportunity for those who are interested to broaden their religious, theological, social and cultural analysis, especially in the post-COVID-19 age. I highly recommend the programme."
- "The summer school was the best experience this year."

Looking at 2022: The EARS analyst team will continue to be composed of young scholars, both from studies of Theology and Religious Studies and beyond. In addition, we are looking into the options of setting up a PhD programme, where scholars from various faculties would guide a PhD student.





Our analysts are located across Europe and beyond.
Their locations are marked on this map.

IV. Network

The EARS network consists of three circles. The member faculties and departments are the first and closest circle within the EARS network. Second, we have participants at round tables and other events. Third are policymakers, academics, journalists, politicians, and others interested in the connection between religion and society.

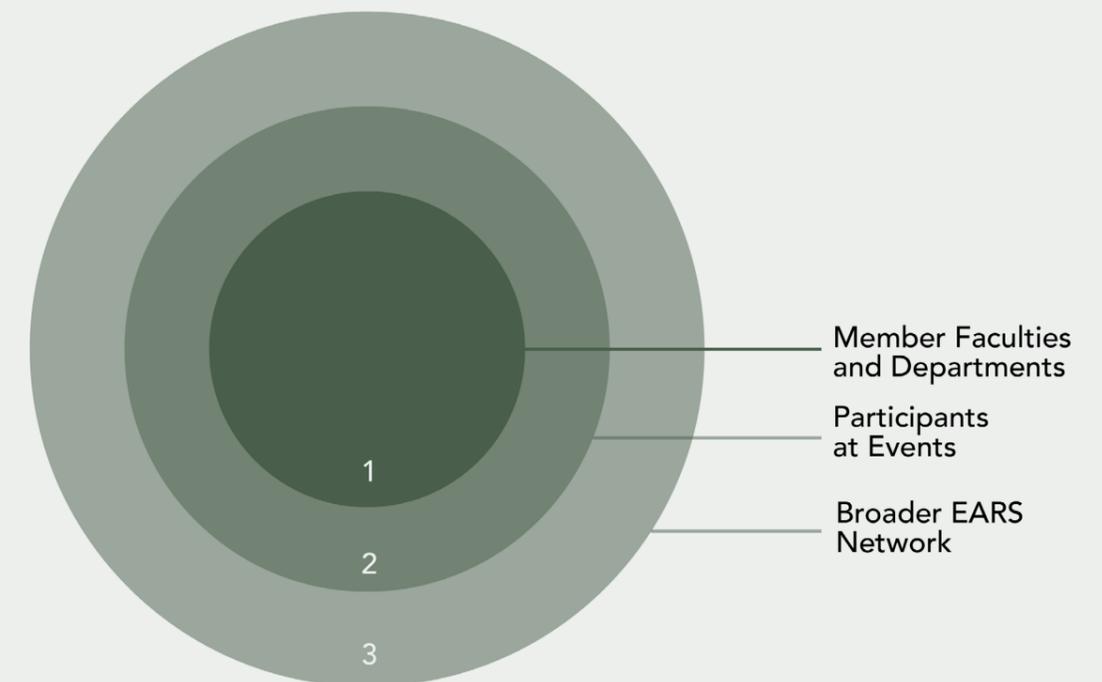
Results 2021: The first circle, the EARS members, has been connecting online for the past two years. For the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, we organised a member conference in real life in November 2021. We discussed the current situation of Religious Studies and Theology in the members' native countries and considered how we can strengthen our partnership in the following years. Meeting each other again was a valuable experience and has reinforced our collaboration.

The second circle, participants at events, has been greatly expanded in 2021. We organised round tables on five topics: Morals and Ethics in Artificial Intelligence, Interest and Morality, Politics of Education, End of Humanity(s), and Cancel Culture. The round tables were joined by academics, representatives from educational institutions, and others.



The third circle was a new focus in 2021. In April, we started sending out a monthly newsletter to our contacts. The newsletter scores very well compared to other nonprofit organisations in terms of open rates (38.5% for EARS compared to 25.5% on average) and click rates (9% for EARS compared to 4.1% on average), showing the involvement of our network. With a few efforts, such as posting the newsletter registration link to social media and directly reaching out to interesting people, we have increased the number of newsletter recipients from 85 in April to 193 in December 2021.

Looking at 2022: We aim to further strengthen the collaboration with the EARS members (first circle) and engage them in new ventures, such as the PhD programme. Regarding the second circle, we will continue to organise round tables in 2022 and invite a selection of academics, journalists, politicians, and other relevant people. It is our goal to connect these round tables to our focus topics, for example by organising round tables for various audiences on the same topic. This should lead to more profound insights and interesting conversations. Finally, we aim to significantly expand the third circle of contacts. We will do so by identifying interesting and relevant people and directly reaching out to them. The analyst team plays a significant role in this process, since they have access to people from different countries and institutions. In addition, we will leverage our reach on social media to further enlarge our network.



V. Narrative

With more and more faculties/departments of theology and/or religious studies closing down, we consider it our task to develop a new narrative of this important discipline. Indeed, theology has, for a long time, been very useful to confessional bodies and institutions. However, secularisation obliges us to think about theology in a different way. Theology and religious studies can now be considered to be the discipline addressing the religious plurality of our society and the cultural structures this plurality has created or has used. To reach a younger generation, we should build on this new narrative to facilitate the continuity of the discipline.

"Theology addresses the religious plurality of our society, as well as the structures implied."

Results 2021: This is a long-term goal. If we wish to reach a younger generation, we should also work on the narrative of theology. This is necessary to facilitate the continuity of the discipline.

Looking at 2022: Through the continuation of our publications and round table discussions, and through the creation of a PhD programme, we wish to continue building a new narrative of theology. A first element of this new narrative is the study of plurality and diversity in our societies. After all, on the one hand, this contributes to polarisation in a religious sense. On the other, it can also contribute to bridging opposition. We wish to know: why and when does one or the other occur? Moreover, when does one turn into the other and what is the cause of this? Combining and expanding the five focus points (insights, publications, young scholars, network, narrative) is imperative to achieving this goal of a new narrative of theology.

"If we wish to reach a younger generation, we should work on the narrative of theology."



VI. Finances

The current costs for EARS to operate are €434.000 annually. Including optional programs and activities, costs are expected to be €510.000. These are net costs excluding VAT and including in-kind contributions from, among others, ftrprf B.V. and the Faculty of Religion and Theology at VU Amsterdam.

