Why Study Religion at Brown?

The Department of Religious Studies is the principal site on campus to engage in research and teaching that pertains to the various manifestations of religion. The Department employs the academic approaches typically associated with the liberal arts, especially the social sciences and the humanities. These include, but are not limited to, a commitment to developing skills and habits of thought that enable students to interpret and engage with a complex world, past and present, near and far, familiar and unfamiliar, natural and social. Religious Studies fosters such excellence in writing and verbal expression, interpretation of the past from written and physical evidence, and interpretation of contemporary society by studying it directly and by applying knowledge of other times and places.

Many of today’s pressing political and social concerns are illuminated by an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices that lie beneath and within the news headlines. By exploring the public and private concerns that religions engage – for example, the nature of community and solitude, suffering and death, good and evil - students discover new ways of interpreting the complex world in which they live. As students venture into the religions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas and Europe, they learn about the formation and transmission of beliefs, behaviors, values, rituals, texts, institutions, and forms of community. Students also learn about conflict and accord within and between religions, as well as between religious and non-religious perspectives. In sum, Brown’s graduate and undergraduate students acquire a variety of scholarly tools for understanding and interpreting the religions in various historical, cultural, and social contexts.

The Department of Religious Studies offers students a wide selection of courses that represent various academic approaches to the study of religion including socio-historical, textual, ethnographical, ethical, and philosophical, among others. The academic study of religion at Brown, then includes a wide array of interests, questions, and approaches. Nonetheless, while respecting diversity in interest and approach, the Department of Religious Studies endeavors to foster an intellectual community among its faculty and students that is coherent, identifiable, and collegial.
Undergraduate Study
Daniel Vaca, Director of Undergraduate Studies
Tina Creamer, Departmental Administrator

The concentration in Religious Studies includes course work in Religious Studies 1000 (junior seminar in methods in the study of religion) and eight other courses conforming to the following requirements:

Each student, in consultation with appropriate faculty members, devises a concentration program which may include up to three courses given outside the department. The student presents (for approval by the concentration advisor) a written statement of the objectives of his or her concentration program and a list of the component courses. The program is expected to encompass the study of at least one religious tradition from each of the following groups. Ordinarily, this requirement is satisfied by two or more courses in each of these areas:

1. Traditions that emerge from West Asia and the Mediterranean World.
2. Traditions that emerge from South and East Asia.

The plan of study must take account of more than one approach to the study of religion,
e.g., philosophical and historical; contain at least two intermediate-level courses (0200-0999), RELS 1000, and two additional advanced-level courses (above 1000). This means that no more than four courses (out of nine) can be at the introductory level. Courses listed in other departments but taught by Religious Studies faculty can count toward the program. Up to three courses that are outside the department and not taught by Religious Studies faculty can count toward the program.

No later than the end of spring registration in the junior year, the concentrator will determine if they wish to write an honors thesis or choose a capstone course for his or her concentration. A capstone course will be selected in consultation with the concentration advisor and other faculty as appropriate. Within the frame of the capstone course, the concentrator will address the theoretical and interpretive issues of his or her particular focus in the Religious Studies concentration.

Honors:
To receive Honors in Religious Studies, a student must write an Honors Thesis. A thesis is an opportunity for students to conduct extended independent research under the guidance of the faculty. To be eligible to write a thesis, a student must have earned a grade point average of greater than 3.5 (A=4, B=3, C=2) on courses that count toward the concentration. Additionally, to be eligible for honors, concentrators can elect to take no more than two of the concentration courses with “S/NC” option, after declaring an RS concentration. (If a student is philosophically committed to taking the majority of her or his courses at Brown as “S/NC,” that student may petition the Department to waive the “S/NC” limit.) Writing the thesis is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of receiving Honors. The thesis must earn an A from its readers for the student to receive Honors, and the student must have earned a grade point average of 3.5 in the concentration (as well as satisfy all the other concentration requirements).

The Bishop McVickar Prize

The Bishop McVickar Prizes were instituted in 1909 by the Rt. Rev. William Neilson McVickar, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Dioceses of Rhode Island, 1898-1910, and are now awarded from the income of a fund established in 1923 in his memory by his sister, Miss E. C. McVickar. The prizes are awarded for the best papers submitted under conditions designated by the Department of Religious Studies.

The prize is awarded annually for the best senior thesis of high quality and academic worth from any concentration submitted on any topic related to the study of religion.

Submissions must be received electronically (pdf) no later than April 15 (or the next weekday following). Please submit via email to Tina_Creamer@brown.edu, and put “Submission for McVickar Prize” in the subject line.
Graduate Study

Janine Sawada, Director of Graduate Studies
Nicole Vadnais, Graduate Program Manager

The graduate program in Religious Studies at Brown is one of the finest in the nation.

From among a large pool of highly qualified applicants, the department admits four to six doctoral students a year. Our students receive five years of full funding; additional funding is possible but not guaranteed. The department’s graduates have an excellent placement record, teaching in such institutions as Harvard, Stanford, Indiana University, University of California, Brooklyn College, Reed College, Haverford, and University of Wisconsin (Madison). Current graduate students have distinguished themselves by presenting papers at international conferences and earning recognition and support from prestigious external funding organizations.

We offer Ph.D. studies in three areas:

★ Asian Religious Traditions (ART)

★ Religion and Critical Thought (RCT)

★ Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean (RAM) (including Ancient Judaism, Early Christianity, early Islam and numerous others)

★ And are in the process of developing a fourth, Islam, Society & Culture (ISC).

For more information on these programs, please visit the Departmental website.

In all programs, our goal is to combine specialized, rigorous training with a common and more general disciplinary approach to the study of religion.

We don't offer a general Master's program, although under exceptional circumstances we will consider applications for a specialized MA program in one of the three designated areas.

Doctoral students are normally expected to complete two years of coursework beyond their Masters degree (or three years post-baccalaureate). These courses are primarily drawn from seminars offered by departmental faculty, but also include individual reading courses as well as courses in other departments, such as Classics, Philosophy, History, Comparative Literature, Anthropology, Political Science, and the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World. The third year is spent preparing for and taking Preliminary Exams, and the remaining years are devoted to developing the dissertation prospectus and researching and writing the dissertation.
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RELS 0022 Introduction to the New Testament
L. Wills

Was Christianity founded as a religion of liberation or oppression? Was early Christian scripture always a "contested site"? Who were the winners and losers of this competition and why? This course aims to answer these questions by providing a historical overview and analysis of the early Christian movement and its literature, including both canonical and noncanonical texts. The purpose is to critically engage these writings in order to understand the practices, beliefs, and experiences of the early communities that produced them. By reconstructing these ancient frameworks, students will gain better context for understanding the contemporary deployment of biblical texts. WRTI.

RELS 0030 (COST 0030) Sound, Song and Salvation in South Asia
S. Reddy

Sound, Song and Salvation in South Asia explores both the theoretical formulations and the performative expressions that constitute the inextricable nexus of sound, music, and religious practice in South Asia. By investigating fundamental concepts such as nada, raga, bhakti and rasa, this course historicizes the ongoing discourse on the soteriological underpinnings of several genres of South Asian music from Vedic chanting to Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions. DPLL

RELS 0040 (COST 0040) Great Contemplative Traditions of Asia
H. Roth

Introduction to the critical study of contemplative practices and experiences emphasizing philosophical and scientific analyses of works from the major Asian contemplative traditions of South and East Asian Buddhism and Chinese Daoism in historical context. Theoretical studies of mysticism and studies from the psychological sciences will be included. Additional

RELS 0045 Buddhism and Death
J. Protass

Death is universal but seldom discussed in contemporary culture. In this class we will address how the varieties of Buddhist religion represent and understand dying, death, and the afterlife. Using images, films, and texts, we will ask: How should we dies? How does death influence the living? Is there an afterlife? What should be done with dead bodies? The class will move ebetween theories and practices and past and current events. Coming to terms with these diverse materials may reveal to us some of our own assumptions about death, dying, and the afterlife. WRTI.
RELS 0050 Love: Concept & Practice
M. Cladis

A study of love (in classical and modern texts and in film) that provides a window into a host of religious, philosophical, and ethical issues. Topics include the potential conflict between divine and human love, between transcendent and earthly love, and the nature of friendship, romance, marriage, and love at the crossroads. Although the scope is love in the West, the Kamasutra and other texts furnish a comparative component.

RELS 0075 Blues People: Topics in African American Religion and Culture
A. Willis/T. Rose

African American religious practices and cultural expressions have been a significant force in American culture and a sustaining force for African-Americans. Some have argued there is nothing distinctive about African-American cultures, others contend that African American religion is merely a response and a regurgitation of European forms of Christianity, while others have erected strict boundaries about what does and does not constitute black culture and religion. This introductory course will investigate what constitutes African American religion and culture, the social and political impact of African American religion and culture, and their relationship, among other things. DPLL

RELS 0080 Japan: Nature, Ritual and the Arts
J. Sawada

This course is an introduction to Japanese cultural and aesthetic traditions as represented in literature, the fine arts, gardening, tea practice, and selected martial arts. Readings include translations of classic Japanese works of literature and aesthetic theory, as well as modern interpretive and historical scholarship. Audiovisual materials are used to supplement the readings whenever feasible. Students who have no previous exposure to Japanese studies are welcome; there are no prerequisites. The format of the course is a combination of lecture and discussion. DPLL

RELS 0088 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
M. Satlow

A survey of the history and major beliefs and rituals of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with special attention to issues of contemporary concern. Will serve also to introduce basic methods for studying religion in an academic context. DPLL
RELS 0090L Pilgrimage and Quest
J. Sawada
An exploration of pilgrimage broadly conceived, encompassing devotional visits to revered sites, personal travel quests, and literary or imagined journeys. Emphasis on the ritual dimension of specific pilgrimages across cultures, as well as the transformative effects of the travel process itself. Some consideration of relations between pilgrimage and tourism. Materials include historical and anthropological records as well as biographical, fictionalized, and poetic accounts. FYS

RELS 0090K Christmas in America
D. Vaca
This course explores how Christmas became a religious, consumer, and social extravaganza. Every year, many Americans devote several months to preparing for and recovering from Christmas. Most participate as Christians, but others participate despite other religious identities. Yet Christmas has not always loomed so large. Through encounters with such phenomena as sacred stories, consumer practices, and legal controversies, this course invites students to ask how and why Christmas became an important event. By the end of the course, students not only will recognize how religion and culture take shape together but also will appreciate how popular practices develop. FYS WRIT

RELS 0195 Gender in Early Jewish & Christian Narrative
L. Wills
Many of the favorite narratives of Jews and Christians in the ancient period (for this course, about 400BCE to 300CE) featured women characters or emphasized issues of gender: Esther, Judith, and Susanna; Mary Magdalene and other gospel women, or Thecia, the perhaps legendary companion of Paul. Both Jewish and Christian texts used gender to explore new ways of constructing heroic women and men that either re-inscribed or challenged traditional roles. This seminar takes up a close reading of narrative texts, compared also with wisdom texts (Proverbs, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Soloon, Avot).

RELS 0250 Bodily Practice & Religion
A. R. Howe
This seminar course focuses on the body as site of knowledge, belief and practice (rather than separate from mind, soul, intellect). Drawing on critical theory, anthropologies of religion, and race, gender, and sexuality studies, we will read theories of bodily practice alongside a series of case studies exploring topics such as prayer and devotion, social reform, violence, and health and healing. While our texts will focus on the application and influence of Christian categories of bodily practice, our theoretical texts will allow students to explore the relationship of bodily practice in other religious traditions. WRIT
RELS 0600C Radical Islam?
N. Khalek

One of the most controversial issues in contemporary political discourse is the question of radicalization and its relationship to Islamic religion and practice. In this course, we will explore the phenomenon of religious radicalization, and explore its relationship to a number of institutions and issues, including but not limited to: religious texts, terrorism, global politics, war, immigration, nationalism, and law. DPLL WRIT

RELS 0290G A Humanitarian Sensibility
A. R. Howe

From Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to Teju Cole’s “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” this course explores the genealogy of humanitarian sensibility through a selection of Western philosophical, historical, literary and ethnographic accounts. It asks: What are the social and historical forces that have shaped the need for and appeals to humanitarianism in the modern West? What does it mean to think, feel and act as a humanitarian subject, or to be positioned as its object? And, what’s ethically at stake when we think critically about humanitarianism? LILE

RELS 0290G (JUDS 0686) The Ten Commandments
M. Satlow

A history of the Ten Commandments from the Bible to today. How have the commandments been understood by Jews and Christians throughout time? What symbolic importance have they had?

RELS 0415 Ancient Christian Culture
D. Ivanisevic

How did the Jesus movement that originated in a backwater of the Roman Empire become the Empire’s dominant religion? What was it like to be a Christian in a world full of religions, cults and philosophical traditions, and of diverse social and cultural identities? An introduction to the history of early Christianity, and to the ancient Christian culture through the exploration of selected topics by means of textual, material and epigraphic evidence. Multiple Christianities; literacy and orality; visual culture; the episcopal authority; wealth and poverty; asceticism and monasticism; hagiography and the cult of saints; sacred landscape and pilgrimage; women and gender; burial.
RELS 0880C (JUDS 0603) Race, Religion & the Secular
P. Nahme

The most “secular” presidential election in American history saw the language of Christian America apparently yield to a rhetoric of racism, misogyny, and white identity. But racialization and secularization are very much intertwined. In an effort to understand how “whiteness” is tied to the history of Christianity and secular, liberal democracies, this class will trace the figure of the “Jew” in the Christian imagination, and examine the racial and religious othering of Judaism as an entry point for reflecting upon contemporary American social and political struggles surrounding religious and racial identities. WRIT DPLL

RELS 1000 Methods in Religious Studies
P. Nahme

Intensive introduction to classical and contemporary theories of religion and the principal methods for the study of religion. Junior seminar for religious studies concentrators. Enrollment limited to 25. WRIT

RELS 1050 (JUDS 1635) Problems in Israelite History
S. Olyan

Topics of recent and current debate among specialists in the field of Israelite history. Problems include (1) the historicity of the patriarchs and matriarchs; (2) the historical evidence relevant to the question of an exodus; (3) the nature of Israel’s settlement in Canaan; (4) the 10th century, era of empire or literary fiction? (5) the land of Judah after the Babylonian conquest. Enrollment limited to 20.

RELS 1340A (CLAS 1410) Roman Religion
J. Bodel

Explores the religions of Rome, from the animism of King Numa to the triumph of Christianity. Topics include: concepts of religion and the sacred; sacred law; ritual space and the function of ritual; festivals; divination; magistrates and priests; the imperial cult; death and the afterlife; mystery cults; astrology and magic.
RELS 1397 (CLAS 1140) Classical Philosophy of India
D. Buchta

This course introduces the classical traditions of philosophy in India. After presenting a general overview of this discourse and its basic Brahminic, Buddhist, and Jain branches, the course will examine selected traditions and themes from both the several schools concerned entirely with gaining ultimate beatitude (the Highest Good) (the schools known as Samkhya, Yoga, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Jainism, and Vedanta) and the schools that concentrate on issues of logic, metaphysics, and language and hermeneutics (Nyaya, Vaiseshika, and Purva Mimamsa, respectively). DPLL

RELS 1990 Individual Study Project

Directed reading and research arranged with individual faculty. Section numbers vary by instructor. Please check Banner for the correct section number and CRN to use when registering for this course.

RELS 1999 Thesis Preparation

Required of seniors in the honors program. Open to others by permission of the chair of the department. Section numbers vary by instructor. Please check Banner for the correct section number and CRN to use when registering for this course.

RELS 2000 Theory of Religion
T. Lewis

Critical examination of major approaches to the study of religion, especially those of the anthropology and the history of religions, with attention to issues in current debate.

RELS 2100F Biblical Studies: Ugaritic
S. Olyan

Survey of Ugaritic grammar followed by readings in mythic and epic literature (e.g. the Ball Cycle, Kirta, Aqhat) and ritual texts. Prerequisite: Knowledge of the grammar of one Semitic language. Open to graduate students only.
RELS 2380A Chinese Buddhist Texts
J. Protass

Each week we will engage in close reading through translation of Buddhist texts in the original Chinese. Selections will draw from sutras, commentaries, prefaces, colophons, biographies, and Chan literature. The course introduces research methods, major sources, dictionaries, and digital tools, and culminates in a seminar paper demonstrating original research using the tools and methods practiced in class. Prerequisite: Reading competence in classical Chinese.

RELS 2400J “Stories of the Prophets” in Medieval Islamic Literature
N. Khalek

In this graduate level seminar we will learn about the literary genre “Stories of Prophets” and its relationship to biography and historiography in the Classical period of Islamic thought. We will also explore the relevant secondary literature. Reading knowledge of Classical Arabic and prior coursework in Islamic Studies required.

RELS 2600L Afro Theisms
A. Willis

This graduate seminar places a theological lens on Black life in North America. Its premise is that Afro-Theisms, not the institutional “Black Church” or Black prophetic religion have been seminal to the self-conception of Black people and their way of constituting racial “others”. Different theistic emphasis at different historical moments demonstrates both the importance and fluidity of Afro-Theisms and sheds unique light on the quest for equity and self-actualization. Starting with the conventional Christian theologies into which New World Africans under slave conditions were indoctrinated, this course will explore the role and impact of Afro-Theisms.

RELS 2700 Historiography of Islam
S. Bashir

A critical appraisal of the field of Islamic history in light of issues in contemporary philosophy of history. We will discuss various ways in which ‘Islam’ has been imagined as an object of historical description and analysis. Topics include: historical thought generated by Muslims; relationship between historical projection and religious ideology; impact of contingent factors such as Mongol domination and modern colonialism; Orientalists views of the Islamic past; significance of narrative patterns, poetry, and modern historical fiction; and contemporary academic and popular trends. Intended for graduate students, with time devoted to materials in original languages (Arabic, Persian, and/or Urdu).
COST 0200 Meditation & the Brain
J. Lindahl/W. Britton

This course provides an exploration and critique of psychological and neuroscientific research on meditation by situating the current applications of meditation in the West in the broader historical context of the development of Buddhism. In this course, we will critically evaluate the finding of scientific and clinical studies of meditation in terms of their methodological rigor, implicit assumptions, and biases. We will also study the transmission of Buddhism from Asia to the West in order to understand the influence of Buddhism norms and worldviews on contemporary applications of meditation. This course will also feature first person...
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www.brown.edu/academics/religious-studies