RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Chair, Professor Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh
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The study of religion in a college curriculum involves the historical and comparative scrutiny of the religious traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. Inevitably, the examination of basic questions about religion—traditional understandings of the divine, religious experience and its literary and artistic expressions, and the role of religion in society and nature—are central to the discipline.

Requirements for the Major in Religious Studies

A minimum of 10 courses, to include at least one from each of the following groups: Eastern religions (111, 212); Judaism and Islam (181, 182, or History 285); Christianity (136); and Bible (143, 144). The 10 required courses will include three religious studies courses at the 300 level or above and a senior independent study project. The three required 300-level courses may not include courses from other departments or institutions. The senior independent study project may take one of three forms: a four-credit independent study (491 or 492) sponsored by a member of the religious studies faculty or an approved faculty member from another department; a two-semester project in the honors program (483, 484) described below; or a Senior Scholars project with one mentor from the religious studies faculty. As part of the culminating experience, all seniors are required to present their independent research in a symposium held at the end of the spring semester. For the purpose of fulfilling the requirement of 10 religious studies courses, two two-credit courses or independent studies count as the equivalent of a single course.

The point scale for retention of the major applies to all courses that count toward the major.

Honors Program in Religious Studies

Students majoring in religious studies may apply during their junior year for admission to the honors program. Students are expected to submit their proposal to the department chair by April 15. Admission is contingent on GPA of 3.65 or higher in the major at the completion of the junior year. On successful completion of the work for the honors program, including a thesis, students will graduate from the College with “Honors in Religious Studies.”

Requirements for the Minor in Religious Studies

A minimum of six courses in religious studies, including at least one from three of the following groups: Eastern Religions (111 or 212); Judaism and Islam (181, 182, or History 285); Christianity (136); and Bible (143 or 144). The six required courses will include two religious studies courses at the 300 level or above. The two required 300-level courses may not include courses from other departments or institutions. For the purpose of fulfilling the requirement of six religious studies courses, two two-credit courses or independent studies count as the equivalent of a single course.

Courses from Other Departments That Can Serve as Electives in the Religious Studies Major/Minor

(Students may petition the chair to consider other courses toward the major)

Art
- 125 Art and Architecture of the Islamic World, 622-1250
- 126 Art and Architecture of the Islamic World, 1259-1914
- 213 Early Medieval Art
- 323 Destroying Culture: Iconoclasm

Anthropology
- 244 Anthropology of Religion
- 246 Religion and Everyday Life in Muslim Societies

English
- 231 Tolkien’s Sources

Government
- 251 Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Accommodation
- 252 Introduction to Politics of the Middle East

History
Course Offerings

RE111s  Religions of India  A study of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Sikhism with a focus upon their religious texts and the cultural context within which they developed. An examination of the relationship of these religious traditions have to one another, their metaphysical understanding of reality, their theories of self, and their views of the social, as expressed in myth, art, and ritual performance. How do these Indian religious traditions enrich our "patchwork heritage" in the United States? Readings, slides, sacred music, and film clips will be used to introduce the respective traditions. Previously listed as Religious Studies 211.  Four credit hours.  S. SINGH

RE114s  Introduction to the Study of Religion: Religion, Ritual, the Body  Piercing, restraint, sleep deprivation, starvation, tattooing. We examine religious modifications of the body through ritual, the use of clothing, the treatment of hair, and through other forms of decoration and even violent modification. In this introduction to the study of religion and recent theories of religion, ritual, and the body, students will learn how scholars investigate religion. They will also learn to describe two major theoretical approaches to religious ritual, to use these tools to explain practices from prayer to extreme forms of asceticism, and to describe and evaluate sources of information for the study of religion.  Four credit hours.  S. ORZECH

[RE117]  A Passage to India: India and the Western Imagination  Beginning with Walt Whitman's romantic journey toward the "soul" of the universe, Western attitudes towards India and India's encounter with Western culture will be studied. Literature and film include A Passage to India, The Razor's Edge, The English Patient, Siddhartha, The Namesake, Gitanjali, My Son the Fanatic, Bend It Like Beckham, and Four Quartets. Historical, political, religious, and visual context of the texts will be provided. A close reading of the texts for their aesthetic value, their existential disclosures, and as narratives on colonialism, racism, and orientalism.  Four credit hours.  L.

RE136f  Introduction to Christianity  Considers historical turning points in key Christian ideas, texts, and practices in order to understand the lived experience of contemporary Christians around the world. Studies debates and controversies of faith in the context of social categories like gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class, and disability. Readings magnify voices of Christian people at the margins of evident power structures, especially (but not exclusively) in the U.S. context.  Four credit hours.  H. HARPER

RE143f  Introduction to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament  Explores the best-selling book of all time by focusing on the first part of the Bible, i.e., the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. We will study famous biblical characters and analyze challenging and unexpected narratives. Students will gain an informed understanding of this rich collection of texts by concentrating on their literary, social, and historical contexts. We will also take into consideration the ways in which these texts have been used in contemporary poetry, film, art, and music.  Four credit hours.  L. EMANUEL

RE144s  Introduction to the New Testament  Students will learn about the construction of New Testament texts, early Jesus followers, and the origins of Christianity through a survey of New Testament writings and other Jewish/Christian/Jesus-centered documents. We will engage the texts with modern scholarly insight, implementing a variety of theories and methods, and situating them within their own historical, political, and theological contexts. Questions include: For what communities were these texts written? When and why were they written? How might the use of a particular theory or methodology impact/shape/influence what we see in the text? And, finally, what does any of this have to do with religion today?  Four credit hours.  L. EMANUEL

[RE145]  Mysticism, Spirituality, and Religion: Naming the Nameless  The Daodejing begins, "The Way that can be followed is not the eternal Way. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth, while naming is the origin of the myriad things." Mystical experience is commonly characterized as ineffable, transcendent, beyond the rational, and expressible only in paradox and metaphor. Mysticism has sometimes been defined as the essence of religion, and at other times as the opposite of religion. 'Spirituality' has recently taken on...
similar connotations. The course is designed to introduce you to the discipline of religious studies through an examination of the history of mysticism and spirituality. This semester we will read a wide range of mystical literature from a variety of religious traditions as well as recent critical reflection on religious experience in an effort to understand the relationship between religious experience, language, and culture. Satisfies the Literature (L) requirement.

Four credit hours. L.

[RE152] Israeli Popular Music Explores Israeli culture and society, past and present, through the medium of popular music. Students will learn about Israel’s political and social history and the rich cultural diversity of its population. Students will develop broadly applicable critical thinking skills through analyzing pop music and its lyrics. In the process, students will gain a deeper appreciation of contemporary Jewish and Palestinian identities and of the relationship between pop music as an artistic genre and the cultures within which it emerges. Three credit hours. A.

RE181f Conceptions of Jews and Judaism A survey of the history of the Jewish people and the religion called Judaism from the biblical era through the Middle Ages, tracing the development of ideas, texts, beliefs, and practices that continue to influence Jewish life and thought today. Examines Christian and Islamic ideas about Jews and Judaism and the historical impact of inequality, prejudice, and persecution on Jewish society and culture. Students will develop broadly applicable critical reading skills as well as those that relate specifically to the analysis of religious texts. Four credit hours. H, I. FREIDENREICH

RE182s Jews, Judaism, and the Modern World A survey of the social, cultural, intellectual, and political history of the Jews of Europe, the United States, and Israel/Palestine from the 17th century to the present. Traces the emergence of contemporary Judaism in its various manifestations. In addition to developing basic familiarity with the subject matter, students will learn how to interpret specific ideas, movements, biographies, and works of cultural production within the framework of broader dynamics associated with Jewish life in modern times. Four credit hours. H, I. FREIDENREICH

RE212f Religions of China, Japan, and Tibet An examination of Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, and Buddhism—the indigenous religions of China, Japan, and Tibet—tracing the entrance of Buddhism into China, Japan, and Tibet and the resulting transformation of this religion in its interaction with these civilizations. The political ideology of Confucianism, the mystical dimensions of Taoism, the mythological aspects of Shinto, the meditative experiences of Zen (haiku, swordsmanship, the tea ceremony, etc.), and the psychological and artistic practices of Tibet. Four credit hours. S. SINGH

[RE214] Global Sikhism: Migration and Identity A study of the South Asian immigration to North America through the lens of the Sikh community. How do Sikhs cope with racism, prejudice, and stereotyping in the new country? How do they deal with gender, sexuality, and transnationalism within their own community? How do they contribute to the political, social, and religious diversity of America? We will explore the themes of displacement, hybridization, multiculturalism, and postmodernity in film, art, literature, and Bollywood bhangra music and dance. The goal is to promote intercultural understanding and strengthen the diversity of our reality. Four credit hours. I.

RE217s Religion in the Americas Examines religion and culture in the Americas, beginning with Native American religions and European-Indian contact and moving forward to contemporary movements and phenomena. Topics will include slavery and religion, politics and religion, evangelical Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the United States, “sects” and alternative spiritualities, and religion in/as popular culture. While the United States will serve as the primary focus, we will consider issues of cultural exchange across national boundaries in the Western Hemisphere, especially Mexico, Canada, and Caribbean countries. Prerequisite: Sophomore or higher standing. Four credit hours. H. HARPER

[RE219] Violence and Religion through the Centuries From the practice of human and animal sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible to the “sacrifice” of Jesus to contemporary acts of bigotry and violence conducted in the name of religious commitment, an examination of the intersection of violence and religion as portrayed primarily in the texts and traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Sacred texts, works of literature, and current events that illustrate and explore the theme of sacred violence will be the focus. Four credit hours.

[RE221] The Jews of Maine Participants will advance popular understanding of the experiences of Maine’s Jews past and present by producing mini-exhibitions for display at the Maine State Museum, along with thematically related programs for school groups and adult audiences. We will explore the question, “What does it mean to be from Maine?” Students in this humanities lab will develop transferable skills in research, multimedia communication, and collaboration while gaining a richer understanding of how Jews and others have staked their claim to authenticity as Mainers. Four credit hours. H, U.

RE223f Religion in the Modern State of Israel Many Israelis—both Jews and Palestinians—live their lives in keeping with "tradition,"
but they define that past and their relationship to it in a wide variety of ways. This readings course will introduce students to religious dimensions of Israeli society and culture and, in the process, to a wide variety of methods in the study of religion. Students will also sharpen their skills in the evaluation of scholarly arguments advanced in secondary literature. Presence of the Past humanities theme course.  
Two credit hours.  FREIDENREICH

[RE224]  Jewish Theology  Listed as Jewish Studies 224.  Four credit hours.  H, U.

[RE231]  Religious Life of Things  Icons, relics, scriptures, beads — we often overlook the fact that the spiritual is everywhere present in material images and objects. Students will learn methods of understanding the role of religious images and objects. Students will use semiotic tools to analyze religious images, become familiar with contemporary approaches to the study of religious objects, and be able to use those approaches to analyze a religious object. Guided research will make use of library and online resources.  Four credit hours.  A.

[RE236]  Modern Christianity  Examines critical turning points in the relationship between Christianity and modernity, including the Protestant Reformation; the encounter between religion and reason; the emergence and development of evangelical Christianity; Christianity’s complex relationships with movements to fight racial, ethnic, gender, and class-based oppression. Designed to increase students’ understanding of the evolution and diversity of Christianity, provide practice in discussing controversial religious topics, refine writing skills, and prepare students to reach their own conclusions about Christianity and its history.  Four credit hours.  H.

[RE242]  The Good Life  What does the good life look like? What does it mean to live life well? We explore these questions through engagement with the lives and visions of founding figures from six diverse traditions of imagining a good life: the Buddha, the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Includes visits from contemporary individuals who understand their lives to be shaped by the traditions in question and an overnight retreat focused on the ‘spiritual autobiographies’ of students in the course. Previously offered as RE297 (Jan Plan 2017).  Three credit hours.  S.  HARPER

[RE244f]  Anthropology of Religion  Listed as Anthropology 244.  Four credit hours.  I.  STROHL

[RE246]  Religion and Everyday Life in Muslim Societies  Listed as Anthropology 246.  Four credit hours.  I.

[RE256f]  The African-American Religious Experience  A sociological analysis and historical overview of the diverse religious organizations, leaders, experiences, and practices of black people in the United States. Emphasis upon the predominant Afro-Christian experience, its relationship with the African background, contemporary African religions, other religions (e.g., Islam), political institutions, social change, urban problems, and the arts. Special attention to the role of black Christian women in church and society. Formerly offered as Religious Studies 356.  Four credit hours.  U.  GILKES

[RE257]  Women in American Religion  An examination of women in American religion from colonial times to the present, including experiences of ordinary women and leaders of reform movements and alternative communities. Attention to how women have embraced and adapted traditional religions and constructed alternative communities and theologies. Increases students understanding of religious diversity and marginalization, as well as the role of organized religion in promoting (and impeding) justice and equality; provides practice in discussing controversial religious issues; refines writing skills; helps students to form their own opinions on issues related to women in American religion.  Four credit hours.  H, U.

[RE259]  Catholics  An examination of the history and culture of the Catholic Church during the past century, with special emphasis on the recent past: Catholic social teachings, Vatican II, the Pope Francis Phenomenon, and what makes Catholics different from other Christians. Intended to provide students with practice in the art of writing about and discussing controversial religious topics and help them to form their own opinions concerning Catholicism—past, present, and future.  Four credit hours.

[RE263s]  Buddhism across East Asia  Listed as East Asian Studies 263.  Four credit hours.  L.  ORZEC

[RE265]  Buddhism: An Introduction  Buddhism introduces students to the family of religions we call Buddhism. The course explores the histories, literatures, material culture, and practices of Buddhism from its origins to the present day. We will examine central Buddhist teachings and practices and their development in the literature of the Theravada tradition and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. The last segment of the course pays special attention to Buddhism in the modern West, the emergence of "Socially Engaged Buddhism" and the application of Buddhist ethical principles to contemporary issues of war, terrorism, and ecological degradation. Involves intensive reading of key primary texts and important historical and critical secondary works.  Four credit hours.

[RE275]  Contemporary Witchcraft: Formalists, Feminists, and Free Spirits  History and practice of contemporary Witchcraft. Often erroneously confused with Satanism, Witchcraft (which includes Wicca) is an Earth-based religion centered on Goddess and God imagery which declares nature to be sacred and derives many of its rituals and practices from the seasons and cycles of the natural world.
Readings, videos on thealogy, rituals, practices, and activism of Witches. Experiential components (discussions with Witches, ritual design, participation in an open circle, personal use of divination) and questions: How does feminine divine imagery affect the development, structures, practices? How has the focus on nature shaped contemporary Witchcraft? Why are many Witches activists? Why is there public resistance to, discrimination against Witches? Three credit hours.

[RE277] Religious Responses to Harry Potter Close reading of the Harry Potter novels will uncover some of the religions and ethics that have contributed to the world of Hogwarts. Students will research the principal voices in the discussion, develop an understanding of both Christian and contemporary Pagan religious expressions, and write their own evidence-based analysis of the question, what are the religious influences in the Harry Potter novels? Three credit hours.

RE297f Religion and the American Lyric: Poetry and Popular Music Is the music of Bob Dylan or the Chance the Rapper "religious?" Or “spiritual?" Did Allen Ginsberg compose sacred texts? In what sense was Adrienne Rich a "Jewish writer?" We explore the poetry and music produced in the United States from the early 20th century to the present day, attending especially to those pieces that engage religious traditions and spiritual themes. Students will develop and apply critical interpretive skills as they pertain to written, spoken, and sung texts and will gain a sense of the wide breadth of the American musical and poetic landscape—covering songs and poems that span racial, regional, and religious boundaries. Four credit hours. L. HARPER

RE298As The Jewish Jesus If Jesus is the epicenter of modern Christianity, does it make sense to situate him historically in a Jewish context? Could there be a difference between the contemporary Christian "Jesus of faith" and the "Jesus of history?" How have some persons argued that Jesus is best understood historically as Jewish, and others as Aryan? This course engages these questions and offers extended study into the historical, cultural, and theological contexts from which Jesus—and those who wrote about him—emerged. It also introduces students to the various approaches scholars use to guide these investigations. Four credit hours. H. EMANUEL

RE298Bb American Spirituality and the Environment Examines historical and contemporary connections between spirituality and environmentalism in American culture. From early Quakers to mid-19th-century Romantics to contemporary Buddhists, we explore how individuals and groups in the United States have conceived of the relationship between environmentally responsible living, spiritual discipline, and social witness. While the course will span geographic regions, special attention is paid to movements and figures centered in Maine. Four credit hours. S, U. HARPER

RE312f Global South Asia: Literature, Art, Environment Explores South Asians in their diasporic and transnational context. What contributions are Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Jews, and Sikhs from the South Asian subcontinent making to contemporary global literature, film, art, and environmentalism? How do tradition and modernity intersect in their works? How do they negotiate religion, gender, sexuality, race, class, environmentalism, medicine, and globalization? Includes writings by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hanif Kureishi, Shashi Tharoor; films by Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta; art by Siona Benjamin, Anish Kapoor, M.F. Husain, Arpana Caur, Singh Twins; and the environmentalist works of Vandana Shiva and Maneka Gandhi. Four credit hours. L, I. SINGH

RE319s Bollywood and Beyond: South Asian Religions through Film A study of South Asian religions through Bollywood and world art cinema. Focus will be on religious diversity, the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and topics of gender, sexuality, diaspora, and transnationalism. Films and assigned readings will provide historical, social, and aesthetic contexts. Goals are to expand students’ knowledge of South Asia, to hone their verbal and writing skills, and to inspire awareness of and empathy for inequities and injustice. Attendance at a weekly evening film screening (to be arranged) is required. Four credit hours. L, I. SINGH

RE322s Food and Religious Identity An examination of the ways in which religiously inspired food practices and food restrictions relate to the establishment and preservation of communal identity. Explores sources from diverse religious traditions and time periods with an eye both to communalities and to elements found only within specific communities. Students will develop proficiency in the contextual analysis of primary sources and the critical evaluation of secondary literature. Four credit hours. S. FREIDENREICH

[RE357] Jesus Christ Superstar: The Bible in Film An examination of Hollywood’s (and other filmmakers’) obsession with retelling the stories of the Bible. Beginning with De Mille’s classic The Ten Commandments, through Gibson’s controversial The Passion of the Christ, including films that range in interpretative expression from literal to metaphorical—the former being an attempt to recreate the story, the latter being an attempt to reinterpret the story. Students also will learn some basic film theory as well as techniques for interpreting film. Four credit hours. A.

[RE381] Women and Gender in Islam Listed as History 381. Four credit hours. H, I.

[RE384] Religious Responses to Ethical Dilemmas An exploration of religious responses to genuinely difficult ethical choices and the ways in which ethicists justify their normative opinions. Examines and compares both classical and contemporary responses to dilemmas in such fields as biomedical, environmental, labor, and sexual ethics. Students will develop skills in the analysis and critique of ethical
argumentation as well as the ability to examine and defend their own values.  

Four credit hours.

[RE387]  Anti-Judaism and Islamophobia in Christian/Western Thought  How have Christian and other Western thinkers put ideas about Jews and Muslims to work in making sense of the world? What are the similarities and differences between ideas about Judaism on the one hand and Islam on the other? How did these intertwined ideas change over time, and how do they reflect conceptions of Christian/Western self-identity? Students will develop proficiency in the contextual analysis of primary sources, the critical evaluation of secondary literature, and original research. We will devote particular attention to the related questions, "What makes academic writing effective?" and "How can I write that way myself?"  

Four credit hours.  I.

RE397f  The Gendered Bible  A course about the Bible and bodies and, more specifically, about examining the portrayal of gender and gendered bodies in the Bible and extra-biblical literature. How are women (re)presented in the biblical canons? How are men (re)presented? What is the relationship between sex, gender, and identity in these texts/contexts? In entertaining these questions, we will engage the interdisciplinary field of gender studies with views to feminist and womanist criticisms, masculinity studies, and queer studies. We will also consider how our readings might impact various communities (i.e., bodies) of storytellers and story-listeners, both in antiquity and today.  

Four credit hours.  EMANUEL

[RE483]  Religious Studies Honors Program  Research conducted under the guidance of a faculty member and focused on an approved topic leading to the writing of a thesis.  

Prerequisite:  A 3.65 average in the major at the end of the junior year and permission of the department.  

Four credit hours.


RE491f, 492s  Independent Study  Individual projects in areas where the student has demonstrated the interest and competence necessary for independent work.  

Prerequisite:  Permission of the instructor.  

One to four credit hours.  FACULTY