RELIGION

Departmental Guidelines

The academic study of religion is a multi-disciplinary exploration of the many ways in which religion functions in the lives of individuals, American society, and the global community. It critically examines the role of religion as an active force that has social, ethical, and ideological consequences. Students learn to assess how religion has shaped their cultures, their family lives, their suppositions of what matters and what is ethical, and their sense of who they are. Students thus gain the analytical, relational, and expressive skills essential to a liberal arts education.

One need not be religious to study religion. The academic study is a lens through which the persistence of religion in the social sphere becomes evident and the personal sphere is enriched. This academic exercise confirms and contests the prevailing sense of reality. What is considered normal in our society is subject to critical review. In the process it enhances skill-sets with transfer value in the vocational sphere as well as deepened awareness of what defines us as individuals and nations. Critical consciousness on moral issues, global relationships, and the existence of community is a result of this academic exercise. Therefore, the questions raised may be more important than the answers constructed. Students who study religion learn how to ask these critical questions.

Faculty

Associate Professor K. Christine Pae, Chair

Professors John E. Cort, David O. Woodyard; Associate Professors John L. Jackson, K. Christine Pae; Assistant Professors, Maia Kotrosits, Martha Roberts; Academic Administrative Assistant Jodi Weibel

View faculty profiles and contact information (https://denison.edu/academics/religion/faculty-staff)

Religion Major

A Religion major requires nine courses. It has the following components:

1. a set of five courses (REL 201 - The Reality of God, REL 204 - Religious Pluralism and American Identity, REL 211 - Introduction to the Bible, REL 215 - Hinduism, REL 224 - Religion and Social Ethics) from which four are required;
2. a concentration of at least three courses in designated areas, designed in consultation with the student’s Religion Department advisor;
3. a seminar for majors and minors only, designed around special topics that will be in a concentration area;
4. a comprehensive examination with take-home and in-class components.

Ordinarily, no more than one course at the 100-level may count. If a student has completed the common courses and fulfilled a concentration, one semester of a Senior Research Project may count toward the nine-course requirement.

Religion Minor

A Religion minor consists of:

1. a common set of five courses (REL 201 - The Reality of God, REL 204 - Religious Pluralism and American Identity, REL 211 - Introduction to the Bible, REL 215 - Hinduism, REL 224 - Religion and Social Ethics) from which four are required;
2. an elective course;
3. a seminar for majors and minors only, designed around special topics; and
4. an abbreviated comprehensive examination.

Additional Points of Interest

Off Campus Study

Denison University works to make study abroad and other off-campus study possible for all students, typically during their junior year. Most students who major in Religion transfer one or two courses for the concentration within the Religion major, satisfy a GE requirement or two, and gain general credits towards graduation. Quite a few do independent research or internships as part of their study abroad experience. We encourage students to visit the Off-Campus Study office to explore options, and to meet with a faculty advisor in the Religion Department to discuss how study abroad can best be integrated into the student’s major.

Courses

REL 101 - Introduction to Theology (4 Credit Hours)

Theology is an attempt to understand ourselves and our world in relation to transcendent reality. It is simultaneously an attempt to state persuasively the claims of faith in relation to the controlling experiences of an era. The course will focus upon theological responses to issues like environmental deterioration, race and gender, violence and the death penalty. This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

Crosslisting: QS 281.

REL 102 - Ethics, Society and the Moral Self (4 Credit Hours)

This course primarily focuses on religious ethics in our contemporary society. Students will explore diverse theories of justice and examine these theories in social realities at both domestic and global levels. Questioning how to become responsible citizens and discerning moral agents, students will contemplate possibilities to build community for peace and justice crossing religious differences. Topics include theories of justice, global economy, food, environmental ethics, race, gender, and sexuality. This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

REL 103 - World Religions (4 Credit Hours)

An introduction to the comparative study of religion, involving case study surveys of several of the major religious traditions of the contemporary world. Guiding questions include: What does it mean to live within each tradition? What does one do? How does one view the world? To what extent is religion a matter of personal experience and to what extent a matter of social and cultural experience? How have people in these traditions balanced the pursuit of wisdom and the practice of compassion in their lives? How do we begin to study the world’s religious traditions?

REL 104 - Religions in India (4 Credit Hours)

"Religions in India" is an introductory survey of the religious life of the South Asian subcontinent. The course provides an introduction to religious traditions in South Asia, including: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.
A historical and thematic survey of the Buddhist tradition from the time of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, until the present. Emphasis upon the ways in which Buddhist teachings and practices have interacted with and been changed by various cultures in Asia, and more recently in North America.

Crosslisting: EAST 105.

REL 108 - Bible, Gender and Sexuality (4 Credit Hours)
This course introduces students to the many conflicted attitudes and images around men, women, and sexuality found in the Bible, from the very different creations of Adam and Eve to Revelation’s representation of the Roman Empire as the “whore” of Babylon; from the assertive and sexually suspicious female figures of Ruth and Rahab to Jesus’ uncertain masculinity in accounts of his death. We will ask: does the Bible support heterosexuality and decry homosexuality? In addition to close, historically-oriented study of select biblical texts, students will be acquainted with core readings in contemporary gender theory. This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.


REL 109 - Introduction to American Religions (4 Credit Hours)
This course examines American religions from the pre-colonial period to the present. Why has religion in the United States always been energetic and diverse? What forms has this religious vitality taken? How does religion fit within the larger trajectory of American history? What is specifically American about the American religious experience? Exploring these questions will inevitably concern such important themes as race, immigration, gender, pluralism, and religious freedom.

REL 199 - Introductory Topics in Religion (1-4 Credit Hours)
A general category used only in the evaluation of transfer credit.

REL 201 - The Reality of God (4 Credit Hours)
The premise of the course is that the metaphors we use for God are profoundly consequential. The ways we imagine God affect our understanding of ourselves and our society. We will explore how particular metaphors impact economic justice, the ecological crisis, history and human oppression as well as our personal lives.

REL 202 - Judaism (4 Credit Hours)
The course is an inquiry into the nature of Judaism. The emphasis will be on the development of Rabbinic Judaism: Theology, History, and Rabbinic Literature.

REL 203 - Asian-American Religions (4 Credit Hours)
Who are Asians and Asian-Americans in the 21st century's United States? What religions have they brought? How have they changed the ecology of our contemporary U.S. society? What issues are they facing? Particular attention goes to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and urban immigrant Christianities. Mandatory site-visits to immigrant religious organizations in Greater Columbus are required.

REL 204 - Religious Pluralism and American Identity (4 Credit Hours)
What does it mean to be “American” in the twenty-first century? Is it even possible for such a religiously diverse people to affirm a common identity of any substance? Today, citizens must negotiate among the often competing demands of religion, community, and nation. This course will examine how Americans have historically viewed religious diversity, consider theoretical approaches to religious pluralism, and explore how contemporary local conflicts illuminate just how religious does (not) and should (not) affect engaged, democratic citizenship.

REL 205 - Religion and Nature (4 Credit Hours)
An investigation of the religious value of nature in Christianity and Buddhism, particularly in America and Japan. We look at how people in these cultures have viewed the place of humanity within the world of nature, and the relationships among humanity, God and nature.

Crosslisting: ENVS 205.

REL 210 - The Nature of Religion (4 Credit Hours)
This course explores some of the ways different scholars have asked and attempted to answer the basic questions, What is religion? What is religious experience? Scholarly approaches include those of history, philosophy, theology, anthropology and psychology.

REL 211 - Introduction to the Bible (4 Credit Hours)
The Bible is a book – or rather, a collection of books – produced and assembled over long stretches of time, worked and re-worked by various groups within the relatively small and usually crisis-ridden community of Israel. In other words, it is a history of revisions, as Israel attempted to make sense of itself amidst changing times and new empires. This course introduces students not only to the historical contexts, literary variety, and major narrative traditions of the Bible, but the social forces guiding its eventual composition as a book. Thus the New Testament will be engaged not as the founding documents of Christianity, but as one of many ongoing Jewish interpretations of Israelite traditions in the context of the Roman Empire.

REL 212 - Introduction to the New Testament: Unbinding the Book (4 Credit Hours)
What we now have as the “New Testament” first appeared not as Christian nor even as “scripture,” but as texts interpreting Israelite traditions in the wake of Israel’s tenuous, subjected, or even annihilated status under the Roman empire. How did the New Testament become what it is now, the foundational documents of a dominant tradition? How does reading with deep historical attention to Israel’s history under Rome change what we think New Testament texts say? We will also be reading some “early Christian” texts that did not make it into the New Testament (The Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Thomas, The Acts of Paul and Thecla), and asking how the New Testament came to be a collection that rendered the very Hebrew traditions composing it an “old” testament.

REL 213 - History of Christian Thought (4 Credit Hours)
A study in the development of Christian teachings to the early Middle Ages. Changing concepts of Church Doctrine and the nature of the church, with its approach to human problems are studied.

REL 214 - The Christian Right in American Culture (4 Credit Hours)
This course will examine the history, theology, practices, and politics of the so-called “Christian Right” in America. In coming to appreciate the complexities of pentecostalism, fundamentalism, and evangelicalism, we’ll look at megachurches, speaking in tongues, the feminism of submissive wives, creation science, and the commercialization of contemporary conservative Christianity.

REL 215 - Hinduism (4 Credit Hours)
One of the oldest surviving religions on the planet, what we call "Hinduism" is actually a complex of loosely related religious traditions that have been woven together by a shared geography and by historical circumstance. By reading primary texts—from the ancient Vedas and Puranas to the work of medieval poets and contemporary film makers—students will be invited into an encounter with the religious traditions and the world views that sprouted up in South Asia so long ago, and that continue to evolve even today.
REL 216 - Religions of China and Japan (4 Credit Hours)
This course explores the basic teachings and historical development of the most influential religious traditions and schools of thought in East Asia, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Shinto. Attention is given to classical texts, popular practice and the recent impact of Western culture on East Asian religion.

REL 217 - Sects and Cults (4 Credit Hours)
A study of new religious movements, cults, and sects in modern America, this course will investigate the theological and religious dimensions of such fascinating phenomena as Satanism, occultism, polygamy, witchcraft, new age religion, and UFO worship. Special attention will be given to the social-structural origins of cults and sects, to the church-sect continuum, and to the variety of social relationships that exist between religious groups and the larger society. The Unification Church, popularly known as the Moonies, Jimmy Jones’ Peoples’ Temple, the Hare Krishna Movement, the Branch Davidians and Heaven’s Gate are among the many religious groups to be examined.

REL 218 - Islam (4 Credit Hours)
A historical and thematic survey of the beliefs and practices of the Muslim tradition from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to the present. Emphasis upon the ways that Islamic teachings and practices have interacted with, changed, and been changed by various cultures in Asia, Africa, Europe, and more recently North America.

REL 220 - Human Rights, Indigenous Rights, Environmental Rights (4 Credit Hours)
This course explores two on-going global debates among academics, activists and policy-makers within the concept of human rights. (1) To what extent should human rights be limited to a narrow range of clearly defined individual rights, and to what extent should they be expanded to cover a larger range of individual and collective rights? (2) Are indigenous communities necessarily better environmental stewards, and so does the extension of rights to these communities lead to better environmental protection? This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) and the Writing (W) GE requirement.

Crosslisting: INTL 250/ENVS 265.

REL 224 - Religion and Social Ethics (4 Credit Hours)
What is faith community’s responsibility for society? What roles can be considered “proper” for the religious community to play in “seemingly” secular society? This course will explore various religious traditions’ responses to the social issues on both domestic and global level, including American foreign policy, Israel-Palestine relations, ecological crisis, racism, economic disparity, and sexual violence. The key moral principles drawn from multiple traditions are love, justice, and compassion. In light of these key principles, students will analyze complex social issues and delineate resolutions for the issues.

REL 227 - Women’s Spiritual Activism (4 Credit Hours)
What is women’s spiritual activism in our contemporary society? What can we learn from those who have struggled to bring gender equality and peace in human society? Is religion anti-feminist or feminism anti-religious? In spite of cultural, racial and religious diversity among women across the globe, women often share the similar stories of physical and psychological suffering caused by their institutionalized religions and societies. Many of these women also testify that their religions enabled them to resist injustice and to build up solidarity with others including men. This course invites the students to explore the spiritual journeys of the feminist activists—their struggles for justice for all humanity.

Crosslisting: WGST 227.

REL 228 - Rebellion, Resistance and Black Religion (4 Credit Hours)
This course explores the connection between politics and religion among Black Americans and the role religion plays in the African-American quest for liberation. It also examines the cultural continuities between African traditional religions and Black religion in the United States. The course examines theological and ethical issues, such as the color of God and the moral justifiability of violent revolution. Students will be given an opportunity to study contemporary religious movements, such as Rastafarianism and the Nation of Islam, along with more traditional African sectarian practices such as voodoo and Santeria.

Crosslisting: BLST 228.

REL 230 - Creation Narratives and Power Relations (4 Credit Hours)
Writing and re-writing the story of the creation of the world was a common ancient practice, especially as people experienced new or increasingly difficult political and social circumstances. In fact, ancient people regularly used descriptions of the creation of the world to express their dissatisfaction with the world in which they lived, to reimagine it, or to justify or critique the powers-that-be. This course reads a breadth of ancient literature describing the creation of the cosmos for not only their literary beauty and philosophical influences/distinctions, but their social and political implications. How do ideas of what is “human” support forms of ideal citizenship? How do these texts imagine and naturalize gender differences, the differences and affiliations between animals and humans, and the reason for pain and suffering in the world? How do they understand the world’s beauty alongside the ugliness of war? How do they try to transform the chaotic realities of the world into an ordered whole? This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

Crosslisting: CLAS 301.

REL 240 - Special Topics (4 Credit Hours)
Special Topics in Religion provides a venue in which to explore in some depth an aspect or issue related to Religion at a 200 level. Topics will vary by semester.

REL 299 - Intermediate Topics in Religion (1-4 Credit Hours)
A general category used only in the evaluation of transfer credit.

REL 300 - Major/Minor Seminar (4 Credit Hours)
REL 301 - Empire: Is America the New Rome? (4 Credit Hours)
The premise of the course is that America functions in the world and in our lives as an empire. While some would argue that we are “the indispensable nation,” others contend that America uses its power in its own interests, even the interests of an elite segment of the country. Consideration is given to the role of capitalism as a distributor of goods and services and the ways in which it forges identity and addresses issues of equity. While there is a discreet focus on class, race, and gender, those issues emerge in other contexts. Attention is given to the biblical tradition as a model for responding to empire, and the ways in which it is exploitive. This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

REL 304 - Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in the US (4 Credit Hours)
This course explores the formations and intersections of the scholarly concepts and practices of race and religion in the United States. The goals are to better understand how and why race often remains a taboo subject in the study of religion and the ways in which race and ethnicity are relevant to religious studies scholarship. To do this, the class examines the development of categories of race, ethnicity, nation, and religion in the context of American religious history and sociology. We then turn our attention to landmark texts and problems in contemporary scholarship. These texts engage with a variety of racial and religious identities.
REL 308 - New Testament Studies (4 Credit Hours)
This seminar will examine in depth either a text or group of texts or a theme that is important in the New Testament.

REL 311 - Racial Politics and National Belonging in Early Christianity (4 Credit Hours)
This course will address the racial, ethnic and national politics of the Roman Empire in order to better understand early Christian texts. Why were early Christians described as a “new race” of people? Why did early Christians use the language of race and ethnicity to describe themselves, and how does that fit together with Christians’ universal theological claims about inclusion and being “for all people”? What does ancient Israel as a broken nation, conquered by the Romans, have to do with understanding who Jesus was and what Jesus and his death might have meant in the first century?

REL 312 - The Holocaust: Where Was God (4 Credit Hours)
The course intends to provoke an awareness of the Holocaust as a historical event, with particular attention to the death camps, and an agenda to eliminate Jews. Consideration will be given to the ways in which individuals were co-opted or resisted, and institutions accommodated or were oppositional. As a religion course it will consider alternative theological responses to the deadly event and the understanding of God. The range of positions will be from the death of god to the preservation of orthodoxy. Finally, attention will be given to the presence of women in the death camps and the designation of God as Mother.

REL 317 - Religion and Society (4 Credit Hours)
This course investigates the relationships between religion and society and the social dimension of religious truth-claims. The central theme entails a cross-cultural study of religious influences on both social stability and change or revolution. In exploring this tension between religion and existing socioeconomic and political orders, we will consider such examples as religious movements, civil religion, and liberation theology.

REL 327 - Women and Social Ethics: In the Global Context (4 Credit Hours)
"The personal is internationally political!" Whether we are aware or not, we live in the globalized world and our actions here and now affect the lives of millions of people whom we may never meet face to face. Through the religious concept of "interdependence" with the secular understanding of "women's rights as human rights," this course will analyze and explore globalized issues of poverty, war, sex-trafficking, migration, reproductive rights, and religious conflict as well as ethically consider how diverse social groups are interconnected to each other beyond national and religious boundaries; and how we study, analyze, and practice transnational feminist activism for all humanity.
Crosslisting: WGST 327.

REL 340 - Seminar: Special Topics (4 Credit Hours)
Special Topics in Religion provides a venue in which to explore in some depth an aspect or issue related to Religion at a 300 level. Topics will vary by semester.

REL 361 - Directed Study (1-4 Credit Hours)
REL 362 - Directed Study (1-4 Credit Hours)
REL 363 - Independent Study (1-4 Credit Hours)
REL 364 - Independent Study (1-4 Credit Hours)
REL 399 - Advanced Topics in Religion (1-4 Credit Hours)
A general category used only in the evaluation of transfer credit.