

# RELIGION

## Departmental Guidelines & Mission

The academic study of religion is a multi-disciplinary exploration of how 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. By studying religion, students gain the analytical, relational, and expressive skills essential to a liberal arts education.

One does not need to 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 understanding of reality. In the process the study of religion enhances skill-sets with transfer value in the vocational sphere as well as deepened awareness of what defines us as individuals, communities, societies, and nations. Critical consciousness on moral issues, global relationships, and the existence of community is a result of this academic exercise. Therefore, the questions we pose concerning various social relations may be more important than the answers constructed. In Religion classrooms, students learn how to ask these critical questions.

## Faculty

Professor K. Christine Pae, Chair

Professors K. Christine Pae, David O. Woodyard; Assistant Professors Kelsi Morrison-Atkins, Rohit Singh; Visiting Assistant Professor Trad Nogueira-Godsey

### Academic Administrative Assistant

Jodi Weibel

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

## Religion Major (established 2020)

A new Religion major was approved by the Denison faculty in 2020. All students majoring in Religion from the class of 2024 forward will follow the curriculum below. It has the following components:

Code	Title
A Religion major requires 9 courses, including:	
REL 200	Thinking about Religion ( to be taken before the senior year.)
Majors elect at least two courses at the 300 level.	
REL 450	Religion Senior Research Colloquium ( to be taken in the first semester of senior year.)

Majors take at least one course whose intellectual center, and the majority of the content (75%), lie outside the Euro-American Christian historical and cultural tradition. The following courses will fulfill this requirement:

Code	Title
REL 103	World Religions
REL 104	Religions in India

REL 105	Buddhism
REL 215	Hinduism
REL 218	Islam
REL 327	Women and Social Ethics: In the Global Context

Ordinarily, no more than one course at the 100-level may count. By the middle of the student's junior year, each Religion major, in consultation with a member of the department, shall submit for departmental approval a proposal for a self-designed thematic concentration of 3-4 courses.

## Religion Minor

A new Religion minor was approved by the Denison faculty in 2020. All students minoring in Religion from the class of 2024 forward will follow the curriculum below. It has the following components:

A minor requires 6 courses.

Minors take REL 200 - Thinking about Religion before the senior year.

Minors must elect at least one course at a 300 level.

No more than one 100-level course may be taken to fulfill the requirements.

All minor students must take at least one course whose intellectual center, and the majority of the content (at least 75%), lie outside the Euro-American Christian historical and cultural tradition. The following courses will fulfill this requirement:

Code	Title
REL 103	World Religions
REL 104	Religions in India
REL 105	Buddhism
REL 215	Hinduism
REL 218	Islam
REL 327	Women and Social Ethics: In the Global Context

## 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)

Does Christianity sanction the status quo or is it an instrument of transformation? Is Jesus a personal savior or an agent of liberation? If the church reflects the society of which it is a part, how can it be an agent for a just order? Are women victims in our social order? Does Christianity contribute to our environmental crisis or its resolution? If God becomes male does male become God? Should the church have same-sex marriage ceremonies? Is the death penalty racist? This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement. Crosslisted with 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 religious moral theories of justice, sustainability, solidarity, equity, peace, and love. Then, they examine these theories in social realities at both domestic and global levels. Contemplating how to become responsible citizens and discerning moral agents in the globalized world, students will envision the possibilities to build up a community of justice across religious, racial, cultural, and gender differences. Topics include justice in global economy, ecological 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.

### REL 105 - Buddhism (4 Credit Hours)

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 106 - Special Topics in Religion (4 Credit Hours)

#### REL 108 - Bible, Gender and Sexuality (4 Credit Hours)

This course is an introduction to the various and often conflicting ways in which gender and sexuality are represented in biblical texts as well as the range of interpretations of these texts over time. In this course, we will read ancient texts alongside contemporary theories of gender and sexuality. On the one hand, we will consider how biblical texts have been used to construct categories of "normal" and "natural" gender and sexuality and, on the other, how they might be read to undermine or subvert these frameworks. In addition to historically contextualizing ideas about gender and sexuality within biblical texts, we will also address contemporary uses of the Bible in public debates. This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

**Crosslisting:** WGST 108/QS 108.

### REL 109 - Introduction to American Religions (4 Credit Hours)

This course examines American religions from the pre-colonial period to the present. Recognizing the uniquely prominent role religion has played in American society, we approach "American Religions" as a category to understand the relationship between religious belonging and marginalization in American society. This necessitates that our study revolves around important social themes such as race, class, gender, nationalism/xenophobia, sexuality, and disability. These social themes will be incorporated into our learning of American religious diversity and models of religious pluralism in American society. Students will gain an awareness of the breadth of American religious experiences while approaching larger questions about the distinctions between, and overlap in, American and religious identities.

### REL 199 - Introductory Topics in Religion (1-4 Credit Hours)

A general category used only in the evaluation of transfer credit.

### REL 200 - Thinking about Religion (4 Credit Hours)

What makes religion 'religion'? Why does one study religion in academic context? This course is designed for current and prospective majors and minors as well as those who are intellectually curious about religion to explore the various approaches to religion not only as an academic discipline, but also as category of human activity and experience. Students will have the opportunity to examine diverse theories and methods in religious and theological studies, to raise critical questions concerning the relationship between religion and society/culture, and to develop their own understanding of what "counts" as religion/religious.

### 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 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 211 - Introduction to the Bible (4 Credit Hours)**

This course introduces students to the literary variety, historical circumstances, and cultural significances of the Bible. It treats the Bible as a collection of texts arising out of and used to make sense of the social worlds in which they were written. But a course about the Bible is never just about the Bible. As a foundational object and document for so many public social projects – including ones we might describe as “secular” – the Bible is much more than a religious book. It is an emblem of authority and power more generally, and the ways certain kinds of authorities (religious or otherwise), are often engaged less for their content than for what we imagine them to contain. So this course will regularly ask students to assess the fantasies and feelings that circulate around the Bible. Most significantly, students will practice ways to enter public conversations on the Bible, equipped with more nuanced historical and interpretive critical skills.

**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 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 217 - Sects and Cults (4 Credit Hours)**

A study of new religious movements, cults, and sects in modern America, this course will investigate the sociological 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, to the religious economy theory 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.

**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 238 - Sacred Texts and Social Justice (4 Credit Hours)**

From women’s Suffrage to Black Lives Matter, biblical texts, ideas, and ideals have played a significant role in movements and struggles for equity and justice in the United States. In this course, we will consider the role that sacred texts play in movements for social change, analyze how ideas about the Bible— and the Bible as an idea— are invoked in public discourse, and evaluate the rhetorical and interpretive moves by which the same sets of texts could be invoked to maintain the status quo or transform relations of power. This course will discuss historical movements for social change in the United States, but will focus primarily on movements for anti-racism and reproductive justice in the 21st century.

**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 282 - Religion vs Science (4 Credit Hours)**

This is a special topics courses crosslisted with REL 282.

**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)**

Is America called by God to use its power to make things right in the world? Does the first-century struggle with empire have a parallel in the twenty-first century? Is empire imbedded in an American ideology? What is the connection between religion, violence, and terrorism? Is the global economic order a form of terrorism? How are class, race, and gender related to empire? This course fulfills the Power and Justice (P) GE requirement.

**REL 302 - Ethics of Peace and War (4 Credit Hours)**

War is one of the most important “ethical” issues in our time. Peace is a forced option when humanity faces the horrendous evil of violence. What roles does religion play in making war and making peace? Can we imagine peace independent from war? This course encourages students to take war and militarism into serious ethical consideration and to contemplate peace and justice in global society. By critically analyzing the issues, theories, and practices of war and peacemaking, students will be prepared to be autonomous thinkers and responsible global citizens who can discern how to make peace in a violent world and how to heal the world broken by war and violence.

**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 305 - Ethics of Sex and Love: Moral Discourses on Religion, Gender, and Sexuality (4 Credit Hours)**

What does religion have to do with intimate love between two adults? Does the Christian Bible teach that homosexual relations are wrong? Does Islam encourage men to discipline their wives physically and emotionally? Is abortion wrong? Why does the state try to regulate sexual behaviors in society? Who has the right to exercise socially acceptable sexuality and express gender? Why is gender-based sexual violence persistent? How is the social perception of sexual promiscuity associated with race? Based on the hypothesis that gender and sexuality are the signifiers of power relations, this course explores morally complex and tough questions concerning human sexuality, intersecting with race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and secular politics. Students will interrogate how religion and state power have historically shaped the dominant understanding of sexual morality, masculinity, and femininity. Taking religion as analytical tools, the course will examine social issues such as same-sex relations, marriage, reproductive justice, domestic violence, and militarized sexual violence. By reading queer scholars of color’s challenges of the mainstream discourse on sex, students will learn how to queer sexual ethics shaped by religion and society and to map out their sexual ethics in light of love and justice.

**Crosslisting:** QS 305, WGST 305.

**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 316 - Religion in Contemporary China (4 Credit Hours)**

In this course, we will together examine the beliefs, practices, and discourse that consist of the Chinese religious landscape from the early 20th century to the present day. Our journey starts with a review of the religious heritage in pre-modern China, and moves on to the twentieth century, a formative age where a new country tries to establish itself on a long history of a religiously pluralistic society, by carefully negotiating the ways of its ancient civilization and the challenges presented by a new age of global conversation and conflicts. We will pay particular attention to the relationship between the many religious institutions and traditions, between religious institutions and the state, and between the ideologies, practices, and traditions past and present.

**Crosslisting:** EAST 316.

**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 328 - Buddhism, Gender, & Sexuality (4 Credit Hours)**

Historian Joan Wallach Scott once warned that scholars could not simply insert gender into their research as though adding a new room on a house already built; they would have to begin again from the bottom. Considering gender as a cultured way of being in, understanding, and interacting with the world within which we are situated, this seminar queries the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in Buddhism and Buddhist communities across space and time, with particular emphasis on those located in Asia. What does it mean to be a woman, a man, someone of the third sex, or none of the above? What are the Buddhist idea(l)s about femininity, masculinity, and personhood? How do these idea(l)s change with translation and transmission? We will explore together the theories and practices of gender and sexuality proposed by Buddhist communities from its beginnings to the present day. Buddhism's major conversation partners throughout history – Hinduism, Confucianism, and Daoism – will also be brought into discussion. Previous knowledge of Buddhism is preferred but not required..

**Prerequisite(s):** No first-year students or by instructor consent.

**Crosslisting:** QS 328, WGST 328.

**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 380 - Yoga, Magic, & Meditation (4 Credit Hours)**

This is a special topics course crosslisted with EAST.

**REL 399 - Advanced Topics in Religion (1-4 Credit Hours)**

A general category used only in the evaluation of transfer credit.

**REL 450 - Religion Senior Research Colloquium (4 Credit Hours)**

Religion 450 is the senior capstone seminar in Religion. The purpose of this seminar is to solidify students' mastery of research methods and contemporary theory in the academic study of religion, to refine students' own research and writing skills through the production of an independent research project, and to promote reflection on the students' role as a scholar of religion.

**Prerequisite(s):** Religion senior majors and minors.

**REL 451 - Senior Research (4 Credit Hours)****REL 452 - Senior Research (4 Credit Hours)**