

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Department Overview

The academic study of religion is necessarily interdisciplinary insofar as religion intersects with so many different aspects of human existence. With a view toward globalized cultural literacy, our students investigate how religions shape and are shaped by culture, society and the environment from multiple theoretical perspectives, including history of religion, philosophy of religion, feminism and gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, environmental studies, literary theory, art history, anthropology, sociology and psychology of religion. Encompassing the study of literate and non-literate societies, our courses investigate the richness and complexity of religious traditions, be they indigenous, Western, or Asian in origin. Our students engage questions at the heart of the human effort to understand and represent the self, society, the world, and immanent and transcendent realities.

Courses in our department cultivate the empathetic imagination necessary for cross-cultural understanding and offer training in a unique constellation of skills, including close textual analysis, creative and critical thinking, and direct observation. Such training well equips our students to enter any occupation requiring a solid liberal arts preparation, including education, law, medicine, diplomatic service, human services, journalism, international business and development-to name just a few relevant areas. Some religion majors choose to pursue graduate studies in religion or to enter seminary, but for the most part our students find that their work in religion informs and enhances their professional preparation for a broad array of careers. The foundational skills acquired in the study of religion may be applied widely. Special expertise provided by advanced work in the discipline proves invaluable in any environment that requires well-honed research skills, critical thinking, sensitivity to diversity, fluency in challenging cultural issues and a globalized knowledge base.

The Religious Studies Department at Skidmore is committed to being an inclusive learning community, seeking to both broaden intellectual horizons and represent a range of identities among its faculty, staff, and students. We firmly believe that the study of religion fosters deep intercultural and global understanding, which in turn encourages and enables informed, responsible citizenship. Our aim, in the topics we address and in the people we hire, is to further a robust and enlightening conversation about how religions shape the world we share. We thus invite persons of any faith, class, race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or ability to join us in that conversation.

Explorations in Religious Studies

Religious studies courses that ordinarily carry 3 credit hours may carry 4 credit hours when they have a fourth contact hour of class or when they qualify as explorations in Religious Studies courses without a required fourth contact hour of class. Such courses develop particular student skills and offer a distinctive approach to learning. Explorations in Religious Studies courses are so designated in the master schedule and follow one of the following models:

Exploration of Religious Studies Through Research (Designated RE XXX (R))

Students design and execute independent research projects, developing research questions and honing the research skills necessary to answer them by identifying and assessing primary and/or secondary sources

(including scholarly literature) and preparing interim analyses (such as thesis statements, bibliographies, literature reviews, drafts). Students typically deliver their research findings through both written and oral presentations.

Exploration of Religious Studies Through Writing (Designated RE XXX (W))

Students spend additional time drafting, critiquing and revising papers in order to foster their skills in analysis, interpretation and persuasion. In order to heighten attention to the craft of writing, students attend not only to content but also to style and voice in their papers.

Exploration of Religious Studies Through Collaborative Learning (Designated RE XXX (L))

Students spend three hours each week in addition to class time in small group activities, working collectively or independently to contribute to group projects. This time will be devoted to group meetings, independent work, and meetings with the instructor to advance group projects. Products of this work will be assessed by the instructor via group presentations or project papers written collaboratively (with group members individually contributing components of a multi-part paper, or independently writing separate papers based on the group project). Collaborative Learning in Religious Studies accommodates a wide range of cooperative group structures varying by length, membership, and size, as well as varying formats for assessment including individual and group grades.

Exploration of Religious Studies Through Critical Perspectives (Designated RE XXX (P))

Students study films, listen to public lectures, read novels, and/or make field trips to enrich their understanding of religion, and submit critical reports on what they have learned in written or oral presentations.

Chair of the Religious Studies Department: Ryan Overbey

Professor: Eliza Kent

Assistant Professors: Lucia Hulsether, Ryan Overbey, Alexander Prince

Teaching Professor: Gregory Spinner

Professor Emeritus: Mary Zeiss Stange

Religious Studies B.A.

Minimal requirements for a major in religious studies are the general college requirements, plus completion of nine courses. Normally, eight of these must be selected from the religion offerings (RE or PR).

Code	Title	Hours
Required Courses ¹		
GATEWAY COURSES		
RE 103	Understanding Religions	3
or RE 105	American Gods: Religious Diversity in the US	
THEORY AND MET		
Select two of the following:		
RE 223	Comparative Myth (TM)	3
RE 241	Theorizing the Sacred (TM)	4
RE 230D	(Religion and Society (TM))	4
RE 290	Religion and Society	4
RE 305	From Apocalypse to Conspiracy	4

RE 330	Advanced Topics in Religion (When topic is Religion and Madness (TM))	1-4
RE 3XX	(Religion and Capitalism (TM))	
SENIOR CAPSTONE:		
RE 375	Research Seminar (must be taken in the senior year) ²	4
Select five or six additional religion offerings (RE or PR). Students may select one course from a list of courses from other disciplines that has been authorized by the religion faculty ^{3,4}		19-24
Total Hours		46-54

¹ At least four of the total courses for the major must be at the 300 level (minimum 3 credits each). Courses must total at least 30 credit hours and should ideally represent, in a way to be determined in consultation with the faculty advisor, a genuine diversity of traditions and approaches to the study of religion.

² RE 375 Research Seminar fulfills the writing requirement in the major and the senior coda.

³ Or under extenuating circumstances two course(s)

⁴ Or may be a course approved by the religious studies department chair taken at another institution

Religious Studies Minor

Code	Title	Hours
Required Courses ¹		
RE 103	Understanding Religions	3
or RE 105	American Gods: Religious Diversity in the US	
Select four additional courses in religion designated RE or PR, at least two of which must be at the 300 level		15-16
Total Hours		18-19

¹ The religious studies minor must total at least 18 credit hours.

Honors

Majors must meet the College requirement for departmental honors, attain a GPA in the major of 3.700 or higher, and attain a grade of A- or better on the major paper for RE 375 Research Seminar.

Course Listing

Code	Title	Hours
PR 324	Philosophy Of Religion	3

RE 103 - Understanding Religions

Credits: 3

An in-depth introduction to the academic study of religion from a variety of perspectives, that attends to religion as a global, cross-cultural human phenomenon. Students will examine multiple traditions, geographical locations, and historical periods. Through close reading of texts, lecture, and discussion, students explore the religious lives of individuals and communities empathetically while also critically examining them within larger political, social, and cultural contexts.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities and Non-Western Cultures requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 105 - American Gods: Religious Diversity in the US

Credits: 3

An introduction to the diversity of religions in America and to basic categories and questions in the academic study of religion. The United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth. This course investigates that diversity, in the past and in the present, and explores traditions imported to America, recent traditions born in America, and/or traditions indigenous to the Americas. Students will explore what counts as "religion" in America and how religious traditions shape and are shaped by other forms of difference (race, class, gender, age, sexuality, etc.).

Note(s): Fulfills Cultural Diversity and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 201 - Priests, Prophets & Warriors: Introducing the Hebrew Bible

Credits: 3

An introductory survey of Hebrew Scriptures, situating the canon in the context of ancient Near Eastern literature and law. Major themes in biblical theology and Israelite religion are critically examined, emphasizing the contributions different sources made to the construction of Israelite identity.

Note(s): Offered alternate years. Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 202 - Jesus Before Christianity: Introducing the New Testament

Credits: 3

An introductory survey of Christian Scriptures, situating the canon in the context of Hellenistic Judaism. Major themes in the New Testament are critically examined, emphasizing the different ways the earliest followers of Jesus understood his teachings and explicated his life and death.

Note(s): Offered alternate years. Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 206 - Religion and the Scientific Imagination

Credits: 4

An inquiry into the relationship between religion and science. Do religion and science exist in conflict, or are they in harmony? What's the relationship between evolution and biblical stories of creation? Who are the "new atheists"? Is artificial intelligence a sign of the apocalypse? Does crystal healing work? Students will encounter these questions as we explore the many ways that "religion" and "science" have interacted, conflicted, collided, and combined. We focus primarily on the twentieth century United States and foreground themes of power, justice, and feminist and anti-racist critique.

Prerequisites: SSP 100.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Bridge Experience requirement.

RE 208 - Native American Religions

Credits: 3

A study of Native American religious experience in diverse contexts, from the American Southwest to the Great Plains and from the far Pacific Northwest to the American Southeast. Students will explore specific religious rituals practiced by groups like the Lakota, the Navajo, and the Yupik and analyze how historical experiences, such as cultural genocide, the dispossession of tribal lands, and the reclamation of traditions, have affected ritual practices over time. Additional topics include: struggles for religious freedom, access to sacred spaces, the relationship between Native Americans and Christianity, and the commodification of Native American spirituality.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 209 - Indigenous Religious Freedom

Credits: 3

An exploration of the ongoing cultural and legal contests over Indigenous sacred lands, mountains, waters, plant medicines, ceremonies and graves in the United States with a focus on the 20th century. Students will employ decolonial historical methods to examine Native peoples' ongoing struggles for religious freedom. Topics include the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) the Native American Church and the sacrament of peyote, Native access to sacred sites on public and federal lands, the contest over Mauna Kea, the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests, and NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection Act). Students will also examine contemporary Native cultural revitalization and reclamation of ancestral Native lands and engage with transcription work to support the Kanatsiohareke Archives project with MDOCS.

Prerequisites: SSP 100.**Note(s):** Fulfills Bridge Experience requirement.**RE 213 - Religious Traditions of India**

Credits: 3

An introduction to the thought and culture of India through its religious traditions. The course emphasizes the history, beliefs, rituals, and symbols of Hindu traditions and gives attention to the Jain, Buddhist, Islamic, and Sikh traditions in India.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.**RE 215 - Islam**

Credits: 3

This survey of the religion of Islam uses the Hadith of Gabriel as its organizing principle. This canonical hadith divides Islam into three dimensions: submission, faith, and doing what is beautiful. We will explore Islamic religious ideals, schools of Islamic learning, and historical and contemporary issues pertaining to each of the three dimensions.

Note(s): Fulfills Non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.**RE 216 - Asian Religions in America**

Credits: 3

An examination of Asian religions in the United States from the eighteenth century to the present day. To heighten awareness of the power and justice issues raised by course materials, students will investigate competing visions of the United States' national character as these visions have become increasingly controversial and polarized since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Our examination of religions with roots in Asia (which may include South Asian Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism and/or Confucianism) allows us to explore patterns in the representation of Asian religions in America, and responses and counter-representations from both Asian and non-Asian adherents. How have these representations supported, or undermined, the right to religious freedom of adherents of religions with roots in Asia? We conclude by exploring how Asian-Americans have. the years since the passage of the landmark 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, adapted their religious traditions and communities to the United States.

Prerequisites: SSP 100.**Note(s):** Fulfills Cultural Diversity and Humanities requirements; fulfills Bridge Experience requirement.**RE 217 - Health and Healing in Asian Religions**

Credits: 3

An exploration of Asian medical systems and practices including Yoga, Ayurveda, Indian Shamanism, and Traditional Chinese Medicine, all of which are grounded in the belief that the body is a microcosm of universal, macrocosmic processes. How do conceptualizations of disease affect our experience of it? Does the way we imagine disease reflect larger social processes, such as those based on gender or class? Students examine the religious underpinnings of the models of the body that people in China, Japan and India have used for centuries to heal from illness, maintain good health, and, in some cases, aspire to a state of super-health that transcends the limitations of bodily existence altogether.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.**RE 218 - Hindu Myth**

Credits: 3

An exploration of the Hindu gods and goddesses of India through their myths as transmitted via diverse media, including sculpture, poetry, prose, drama, film, television and comic book. In addition, students examine competing theories of myth, the politics of gendered visions of the divine and the effects of the medium on the transmission of religious messages.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.**RE 219 - Religion and Society in Modern India**

Credits: 3

An examination of the dynamics of religious pluralism in modern India. Students examine the vibrant and irrepressible role of religion in Indian society from the early modern Mughal and British periods to the contemporary moment, exploring how religion has both fostered social unity and exacerbated conflict. Students will study the wide-ranging social effects of colonial rule on Indian religious traditions, especially Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity, and the creative responses of Indians to the challenges and opportunities of modernity. Emphasizing the political and social dimensions of religion, students will engage with topics such as religious change and social mobility, the changing role of women in religion, the religious roots of the Indian Independence movement, religious violence and Gandhian nonviolence, the rise of Hindu nationalism, inter-religious cooperation and conflict, and the development of Hinduism in diaspora.

Note(s): Fulfills Cultural Diversity and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.**RE 220 - Encountering the Goddess in India**

Credits: 3

An introduction to the Hindu religious culture of India through a study of major Hindu goddesses. The vision (darsan) of and devotion (bhakti) to the feminine divine image will be explored. An interdisciplinary approach will explore the meaning of the goddess in literature, painting, poetry, religion, and sculpture.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 221 - Buddhism: An Introduction

Credits: 3

An introductory survey to the Buddhist tradition, focusing on its history and development, key doctrines and practices, geographic spread, and cultural adaptations. Students will examine the intellectual and philosophical history of Buddhism in detail as well as explore how Buddhism functions as a living, practical tradition.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western Cultures and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 222 - Mindfully White: Race and Power in American Buddhism

Credits: 4

Is American Buddhism all about whiteness and capitalism? In this course we survey the history of American Buddhism from the nineteenth century to the present, focusing on the mindfulness movement and on questions of race and power. First, we will study how the mindfulness movement has reinforced neoliberal, capitalist models of self and society. Next, we will explore exciting new research on the overlooked histories of Asian-American and Black Buddhists. As American Buddhist communities wrestle with questions of whiteness and the appropriations of mindfulness by corporations like Google, students in this Bridge Experience course will contribute to public conversations on these pressing issues.

Prerequisites: SSP 100.

Note(s): Fulfills Cultural Diversity and Humanities requirements; fulfills Bridge Experience and Humanistic Inquiry requirements.

RE 223 - Comparative Myth

Credits: 3

A comparative study of myths from around the world. A myth is a sacred story believed by those telling it to disclose important truths about the world and how people should live in it—they are alive with action and infused with meaning. Students will survey some of the major theories about myth and learn to think critically about myth and the comparative method.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 225 - Religion and Ecology

Credits: 3

Explores the intersection of religion and ecology by examining causes of the environmental crisis, how views of nature are conditioned by culture and religion, and the response from naturalists, scientists, and religionists who are concerned about the environmental crisis. The lectures and readings will approach these issues from a variety of religious perspectives and will include Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, feminist, pragmatist, and scientific voices.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 230 - Topics in Religion

Credits: 1-4

The study of a selected special topic in religion.

Note(s): May be repeated with the approval of the department. Fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 241 - Theorizing the Sacred

Credits: 4

An introduction to the theory and methodology of the academic study of religion. The course examines both foundational theories and contemporary approaches that draw from disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and gender studies. Issues identified by theorists from traditionally marginalized groups will be explored, as well as strategies for examining religion in relation to other aspects of social life and cultural expression such as politics, the arts, literature, media, and history.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 290 - Religion and Society

Credits: 4

An exploration of religion and society. What is the intersection between religion and social life, and what ought it to be? What conceptual and descriptive tools do we need in order to find out? People tend to make assumptions about religion, especially when it intersects with other hot topics in public discourse—religion and society, religion and politics, religion and freedom, religion and science, etc. In this class, we think through these topics, in order to interrogate our own preconceptions and how they may facilitate or block our capacity to understand how social worlds emerge, unravel, and remake themselves. The work for the course is a series of exercises in which students consider the major research strategies of a scholar of religion. Likely topics include: the politics of classification, histories of empire and colonialism, religion and capitalism, and feminist/queer approaches to the study of religion.

Note(s): Suggested prior coursework in Religion, but not required; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 299 - Professional Internship in Religion

Credits: 1-4

Internship opportunity for students whose academic and co-curricular experience has prepared them for professional work related to some aspect of religious studies. With faculty sponsorship and approval of the director of the Religious Studies Program, students may extend their educational experience into numerous areas relevant to the academic study of religion. Academic assignments will be determined by the faculty sponsor in consultation with the on-site supervisor.

Prerequisites: Two courses in religious studies.

RE 303 - Religion In Contemporary American Society

Credits: 4

A study of the backgrounds and contemporary forms of American religions. Attention will be given to the institutional, liturgical, and doctrinal patterns of these religions and the application of their principles to such social problems as the state, education, the family, sex, human rights, and war.

Prerequisites: Two courses in the following: philosophy, religion, history, economics, psychology, and sociology, or permission of instructor.

Note(s): Offered alternate years.

RE 305 - From Apocalypse to Conspiracy

Credits: 4

An examination of the historical continuities between apocalyptic literatures and conspiracy theories, focusing on millennialist groups convinced that the world as we know it will soon end. From antichrists to QAnon, people have long imagined themselves in a cosmic struggle against the evil forces controlling the world, and so they agitate for a more just order. Students investigate case studies: Millerites, Jehovah's Witnesses, UFO religionists, so-called cargo cultists, Odinists, alongside of sociological and psychological theories, exploring how End-time prophecies and doomsday scenarios construct their authority and exert their appeal.

RE 306 - Religion and Capitalism

Credits: 4

An exploration of the religious aspects of racial capitalism and the economic qualities of religion. Students develop literacies for reading sophisticated critical-theoretical texts, while bringing these texts to bear on concrete historical and ethnographic contexts. Key topics include: the intersection of Christian mission with the transatlantic slave trade, theories of labor and exploitation, cultures of global finance banking, the rise of "capitalist social responsibility," and the religious histories of corporate personhood.

Prerequisites: one course in *Religious Studies*, *American Studies*, *Gender Studies*, or *Black Studies*.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities requirement; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry requirement.

RE 316 - ORGANIZE: Solidarity in Theory and Practice

Credits: 4

An exploration of the history, theory, and practice of grassroots organizing. Often the response to overwhelming systemic injustice—from climate change, to gender-based violence, to labor exploitation, to carceral terror—is to organize. But what is organizing? How is it different from activism or advocacy? What can today's organizers learn from grassroots social, religious, and political movements of the past? How do organizers navigate conflicts around strategy, leadership, and identity? This interdisciplinary course explores these questions as live political and social questions worked out through practice and experimentation. Students gain familiarity with classic debates about organizing process, analyze how these questions manifest in lived contexts, and apply what they have learned to a concrete project of their own choosing.

Prerequisites: SSP 100.

Note(s): Fulfills Bridge Experience requirement.

RE 320 - Yoga: History, Theory, Practice

Credits: 4

An exploration of yoga from its roots in Hindu religious philosophy to its current status as a globally popular form of physical culture. Understood as a set of physical, mental and meditative techniques, yoga has been employed by Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Buddhists to attain magical powers, heightened states of consciousness, and spiritual liberation. But it has also been used more recently as a form of exercise consisting of stretches, muscle-building poses, and breathing techniques. This seminar examines the social, religious, political, and historical issues surrounding the practice of yoga, as we investigate its development in various socio-historical contexts.

Prerequisites: One course in *Religious Studies* or *Philosophy* or *AS 101*.

Note(s): Fulfills Humanities and non-Western Cultures requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 321 - Buddhism and the Body: Desire, Disgust, and Transcendence

Credits: 4

An exploration of the ways that Buddhists have constructed, disciplined, despised, and venerated the human body. We will explore the Buddhist body in its various incarnations: the disciplined monastic body of monks and nuns; the hyper-masculine body of the Buddha; the sacred corpses of saints; the body given away in sacrifice; the body as marker of virtue, and vice; the sexual body; the body transfigured in ritual; and the body analyzed and scrutinized in medical traditions.

Prerequisites: One course in *Religious Studies* OR one course in *Gender Studies* OR one course in *Asian Studies*.

Note(s): Fulfills non-Western and Humanities requirements; fulfills Humanistic Inquiry and Global Cultural Perspectives requirements.

RE 330 - Advanced Topics in Religion

Credits: 1-4

The study of a selected special topic in religion.

Prerequisites: One course in *religion* or *permission of instructor*.

Note(s): May be repeated with the approval of the department.

RE 371 - Independent Study in Religion

Credits: 1-4

An opportunity for qualified majors to do special studies in the field of religious studies beyond or outside of the regular departmental offerings, which results in written work. Supervised by a member of the Religious Studies department.

Prerequisites: *Permission of department*.

RE 375 - Research Seminar

Credits: 4

Advanced study of a topic that reflects upon religion and the study of religion, which culminates in the writing of a substantial research paper and a formal oral presentation.

Prerequisites: *Senior or junior standing in the Religious Studies major; Religious Studies minors and interested others by permission of instructor*.

Note(s): Fulfills the writing requirement in the major. Fulfills Senior Experience Coda requirement.

RE 376 - Senior Thesis

Credits: 3

Individual conferences with senior majors in the areas of their research projects.

Prerequisites: *Senior standing in religious study major*.

Note(s): Fulfills the writing requirement in the major.

RE 399 - Professional Internship in Religious Studies

Credits: 1-4

Professional experience at an advanced level for juniors and seniors whose academic and cocurricular experience has prepared them for professional work related to some aspect of religious studies. With faculty sponsorship and approval of the director of the Religious Studies Program, students may extend their educational experience into numerous areas relevant to the academic study of religion. Academic assignments will be determined by the faculty sponsor in consultation with the on-site supervisor.

Prerequisites: *Two courses in religious studies, one of which must be at the 300 level*.