AREA III: HISTORICAL STUDIES

The intent of Historical Studies is to foster and demand serious consideration by students of the essential historical substance of Christian faith and tradition. Two aspects of inquiry merge in this area of the curriculum: (1) the development of analytic capacities for the understanding of religious thought and practice in their cultural context, and (2) special studies in the cultural context itself that are deemed essential to competent ministry. Work in this area includes social and cultural analysis often focusing on issues that arise at the intersection of established disciplines. Area III thus includes subjects falling outside the domain of explicitly Christian thought.

REL 703a, Methods and Sources of Religious History  Erika Helgen
This course introduces students to the historiography of religious history; to the history of methods, approaches, and problems in the field; and to techniques for using and citing primary and secondary sources in the study of religion. Seminars include lectures, common readings, writing exercises, and presentations by students and visiting scholars. Students develop research proposals related to their specific areas of interest. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 712a, History of Early Christianity: Origins and Growth  Staff
This course introduces students to early Christianity from apostolic times through the eighth century. It examines the social, political, and religious context of early Christianity; its expansion and Imperial adoption; the character of its life, worship, and mission; the formation of the Christian scriptures; the articulation and defense of a central body of doctrine; church councils and creeds; the monastic movement; and early Christian art. In conversation with influential theologians of the period, we ask questions about ways in which early Christian identities are formed and explore how power is used and distributed in this process. Students are exposed to a range of primary sources and modes of historical study. This course serves as essential preparation for the study of Christian history and theology in later historical periods. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 713b, History of Medieval Christianity: Learning, Faith, and Conflict  Staff
The Middle Ages have been defined by European culture as the period between 500 CE and 1500 CE. It is an age that witnessed the transformation of European Christianity into a Latin-speaking religious community under the pope. The Latin Church became increasingly separate from the developments in the East and Asia. For too long this epoch has served in legitimating discourses of confessions, nations, and ethnic groups, such as with the nationalistic construction of the Germanic tribes. The course aims to draw a new image of these thousand years in terms of time, geography, ethnicity, gender, and culture. Medieval Christianity offers multiple possibilities for understanding both the perils and the development of Christianity in an age of rapid change. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 714a, History of Early Modern Christianity: Reformation to Enlightenment  Bruce Gordon
This course introduces students to the rapidly changing world of early modern Christianity, a period that ranges from the Reformation to the Enlightenment and the transatlantic worlds of the eighteenth century. This age saw the dramatic expansion of Christianity beyond Europe to Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and the course explores the global nature of the early modern world. Themes such as colonization, slavery, and the diversities of religious experience are examined. Students are exposed to a range of primary sources and historical methods to examine rival interpretations and perspectives. The course focuses on the reading of a wide variety of primary sources from the period. Above all, it challenges students to consider the past both on its own terms and how it continues to shape our present. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 715b, History of Modern Christianity: American Encounters, Postmodern Transformations  Erika Helgen
This class focuses on critical encounters among peoples who have contributed to the development of modern Christian cultures in the Americas from the eighteenth century to the present. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive history of religion (or even of Christianity) in North America and Latin America, but rather highlights key topics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality and the dynamics of imperialism, modernity, and postmodernity in religious history. Students are challenged to consider various methods for interpreting the past, to develop their own skills of historical interpretation, and to locate their own communities as products of the histories we consider. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 717a, Witchcraft and Witch-hunting in Early Modern Europe and America  Kenneth Minkema
This seminar examines witchcraft and witch-hunting in Europe and America from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century through reading and discussion of primary documents and classic and recent studies in the field—including social, cultural, and intellectual history, gender and women’s studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and town and environmental studies. Students learn about the interaction of religious beliefs relating to witchcraft and the occult with social and cultural conditions and shifts, the history of the interpretation of witchcraft and witch-hunting, and the continuing relevance of witchcraft studies as a laboratory for new approaches and methods. Area III.  3 Course cr

REL 723b, The Liberation Theology Movement in Latin America: History and Sources  Erika Helgen
This course explores the history of liberation theology and liberationist Christian movements in Latin America, paying particular attention to the political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications of the emergence of the “Church(es) of the People.” The majority of assigned readings are primary sources that document a wide variety of liberationist experiences and actors. Students read about activists in peasant leagues, priests resisting authoritarian regimes, bishops coming together to outline new paths for the Latin American Catholic Church, women promoting feminist liberationologies, laypeople leading ecclesial base communities, and more. The seminar examines and discusses a number of questions, including: How did the liberation theology movement change over time? What was the relationship between religion and politics in Latin America during times of war and dictatorship? How did the liberation theology movement subvert...
traditional notions of political and religious authority? What does it mean to build a “Church of the People,” and how did the liberation theology movement succeed and/or fail to build such a church? Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 731a, Origins of Christian Art in Late Antiquity  Felicity Harley
This course examines the origins and development of Christian art in the visual culture of Roman late antiquity, ca. 200–ca. 500 CE. Its aim is to introduce students to key developments in the history of Christian art through the close study of images preserved on a range of objects in different media (including frescoes, glassware, sculpture, coins, textiles, mosaic) made for a variety of purposes. The course involves visits to the Yale Art Gallery and focuses on the importance of situating objects within their larger social and cultural context through the analysis of primary source evidence, which may include archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic, and textual sources (Jewish, early Christian, and other contemporary Roman texts). Topics include the literary and archaeological evidence for early Christian attitudes to visual representation; contexts of manufacture; the social and economic basis of patronage; Roman political influence on Christian iconography; development of new genres of imagery; and the role of imperial patronage in the transformation of civic spaces. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 732b, Women in African Christianity: Stories, Ministries, Theologies, Renewal  Staff
In African Christianity, women play crucial roles as pioneers (first converts), keepers of the faith, prophets, healers, teachers, theologians, leaders, and innovators both in the church and in society. This course is a study of the lives, ministries, theologies, and influence of women in historical and contemporary expressions of African Christianity across all major traditions of the church. Major themes explore ancient African Christianity; women’s movements; issues of gender, power, and leadership; healing; women’s written and oral theology; Christology; narrative theology; indigenous Christian movements; mission and evangelism; African Christian art and music; ecofeminism and environmentalism; and African women in the public square. In addition to traditional academic sources, the course uses biography to explore the lives and ministries of notable Christian figures from anthropological, theological, ethnographic, aesthetic, and cultural perspectives. Units invite reflection on the lives of particular African Christian women and explore questions related to ministry, theology, mission, and social impact. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 747b, Islamic Art and Architecture in the Mediterranean  Orgu Dalgic
This course surveys the history of Islamic cultures through their rich material expressions beginning from the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century to the present and extending across the Mediterranean from Spain to Syria. The course aims to familiarize students with the major periods, regions, monuments, and media of the Islamic cultures around the Mediterranean; and with basic principles of Islam as they pertain to the visual arts, and in particular their interactions with the Christian world. We discuss architecture (mosques, madrasas, mausolea, etc.) as well as works of art in various media (calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, textiles, ceramics, etc.) within both the Islamic and the larger, universal, and cross-cultural contexts. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 749a, Global Catholicism  Erika Helgen
In 1979 Karl Rahner declared that the Second Vatican Council had initiated an entirely new epoch in Catholic history: it was the moment when the Church ceased to be identified solely with European culture and came to be known as a “world church.” What did Rahner mean by this statement, and what are its implications for how we view the past, present, and future of the Catholic Church? This course examines the history of the Catholic Church’s global growth, paying close attention to how diverse actors, cultures, and events both shaped and were shaped by Catholic institutions and lived expressions of Catholic faith. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 755b, An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism  Vasileios Marinis
Monasteries and monasteries constituted a quintessential element of Byzantine society. This seminar investigates Byzantine monasticism in its historical, theological, and social contexts from its origins in the third century to the codification of Hesychastic practice in the fourteenth. The course aims to familiarize students with the foundational texts of this tradition; inquire into lives of monastic saints as both rhetorical constructs and historical sources; analyze foundation documents that regulated liturgical and everyday life in Byzantine monasteries; explore the architecture of and artistic production in Byzantine monasteries; and understand the ways and means by which cults of saints were developed and cultivated in a monastic context. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 758a, Constantinople/Istanbul  Orgu Dalgic
This seminar explores issues related to the urban development, monuments, and built environment of the city of Constantinople/Istanbul from Late Antiquity to modern times. The course focuses on three periods: Byzantine Constantinople (fourth to fifteenth century), when the city, famed for its riches and beauty, became the stage for Christian imperial and religious ritual; Ottoman Istanbul (fifteenth century to 1923), during which it constituted the center of a multiethnic and multireligious empire with Islam as the dominant religion; and “secular” Istanbul from the establishment of the Turkish nation-state in 1923 until today. Through a series of case studies, we examine the continuity and change of the city’s history through demographics, religious practices, architectural patronage, and the use of urban spaces for social and commercial activities, as well as for ceremonies and political mobilization. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 762b, History of Early Christian Liturgy  Marie-Ange Rakotontaina
This course offers a journey through the sources of early Christian liturgy. We interrogate the texts (and other types of sources including architecture and iconography) and the evolving methods for the study of early Christian worship and sacrament from the New Testament into the late patristic period. Topics include the development of eucharistic prayers, the rites of initiation, the liturgical year, and prayer. Students engage with an array of sources for the delicate exercise of historical reconstruction (including liturgical texts from various genres – doctrinal treatises, hymns, laws, poetry – and material sources). They analyze this variety of sources to draw historical, theological, and liturgical conclusions. Primary sources are our guides through close reading and critical reflection. Personal
interaction with the textual and material sources is crucial for us to understand the practice of early Christian liturgy. Area III and Area II.
3 Course cr

REL 763a, Death and Afterlife in Eastern Christian Traditions  Maria Doerfler and Vasileios Marinis
Death, for ancient Christians as in the present era, sat at the intersection of a wide range of discourses. Doctors and intercessors sought to avert it, jurists to mitigate its impact on families and the flow of capital, philosophers and theologians to prescribe approaches to it, and bishops and other religious professionals to create rituals by which to assist the departed’s transition into the afterlife and to channel the grief of surviving loved ones. This seminar aims to introduce students to the pluriformity of material, the literary customs, and the liturgical practices surrounding death in early and Byzantine Christianity, from the fourth through the fifteenth century CE. After an initial foray into the sources, both biblical and philosophical, from which Christians constructed ideas about death and the afterlife, the seminar moves to exploring strategies of commemorating the departed; competing notions about the fate of the soul after death; and the anticipated final judgment, including the loci—heaven and hell—to which Christians expected it to assign all humanity. Area III and Area V.  3 Course cr

REL 763b, Biography and Religion  Bruce Gordon
Biographies have always had a contested place within the scholarly disciplines of history and religious studies. Although they are the most popular form of history, both in print and on screen, lingering suspicions remain that they lack methodological and theoretical rigor and too often stray toward hagiography or become hatchet jobs. This course examines the particular challenges of writing about religious lives and considers how authors seek to distill the inner spiritual world and outward acts of men and women from early Christianity to our time. Biographies offer unique ways of thinking about the complicated entanglement of religious convictions in human lives. They also demonstrate the power of religion as a catalyst for individual and communal action. We discuss biography as a genre for conveying the diversity of the numinous; and further, how lived experiences of religion as well as more abstract thinking can be placed within narrative forms employed by biographers. Area III. Prerequisite: one of REL 712, REL 713, REL 714, or REL 715, or relevant background from previous studies; or permission of the instructor.  3 Course cr

REL 771a, Introduction to Syriac Christianity  Maria Doerfler
This seminar aims to introduce students to the literary, historical, and theological tradition of Syriac Christianity and the developing field of Syriac Christian studies. In this vein, students encounter a number of the tradition’s key authors; learn to locate the tradition’s development in the context of different imperial cultures and religious interlocutors, including Judaism and Islam; and explore topics at the vanguard of current scholarship, including distinctive approaches to asceticism, ritual, and historiography. In addition to weekly meetings, the seminar requires attendance at three special sessions: a visit to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and its considerable Syriac manuscript holdings; a visit to the Yale Art Gallery and its collection of relevant artifacts and coins; and an introduction to the use of digital humanities in Syriac studies through the Yale Digital Dura-Europos Archive (YDEA). Area III and Area I.  3 Course cr

REL 771b, Francis and Clare of Assisi  Staff
In the early thirteenth century, the question of poverty came to the fore in medieval Christianity. Many people rebelled against the structures of the vastly profitable world of trade and asked if it could still be reconciled with Christian values. The most influential figures of this movement were two young people from Assisi in central Italy: Francis and Clare, both later canonized by the Catholic Church. In them we find sincere efforts to live true Christian discipleship according to the rules of the Sermon on the Mount. In this course we explore their biographies and thought. The sources we read were written both by themselves and by their hagiographers. We seek to determine the extent to which this material is reliable or not, and, in addition, aim to construct a historical and theological image of Francis and Clare as we examine enduring and unresolved questions about them. Area III. Prerequisites: one of REL 712, REL 713, REL 714, or REL 715, and a course in theology; or sufficient background from previous studies; or permission of the instructor.  3 Course cr

REL 773a, Core Texts of Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham  Staff
Scholasticism is somewhat like hard-core training for the brain: scholars of the High Middle Ages used Aristotelian philosophy to express Christian belief. Despite later generations mocking the allegedly widespread inflexibility of scholasticism, a closer examination of the doctrines reveals the diversity of theological approaches. In this course, we follow the works of two extraordinary thinkers: Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican in the thirteenth century, and William of Ockham, a Franciscan of the fourteenth century. While Aquinas trusted in the possibilities of reason to resolve most theological problems, the latter questioned whether reason was able to grasp faith. Together, we closely read texts from both authors, seeking to explore their presuppositions, arguments, and conflicts. This approach both helps us to understand a foreign world and presents challenges for our contemporary thought. Area III. Prerequisites: one of REL 712, REL 713, REL 714, or REL 715, and a course in theology; or sufficient background from previous studies; or permission of the instructor.  3 Course cr

REL 774a, Mysticism in the West 1100–1700  Bruce Gordon
As in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, mystical experiences—intellective and bodily—are integral to Christianity, beginning with accounts of divine encounters and visions in the Bible. Mysticism, however, is by no means a uniform set of beliefs or practices. It has always occupied a contested place in the western churches, ranging from sanctity worthy of canonization to heresy, censure, and persecution. Indeed, the nature of mysticism within the realm of religious experiences remains hotly debated, especially in the recent work of historians, theologians, anthropologists, and scholars of gender and sexualities. Mystical experiences knew no institutional, doctrinal, societal, or gender boundaries. Those who have left accounts of their experiences—textual, visual, or musical—include theologians and laity, women and men, elites and common folk. We examine a broad range of textual sources, including tracts, devotional works, sermons, and vernacular literature, as well as art and music. Authors and movements are studied in their historical and social
contexts, focusing on themes such as sacraments, hierarchies of knowing and sensing, the role of the symbolic, gender, and narratives of the body. The course draws on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to broaden the range of questions investigated. Area III. Prerequisites: REL 712, REL 713, REL 714, or REL 715, and an introductory course in theology; or permission of the instructors. 3 Course cr