AREA V: COMPARATIVE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Courses in this area are grouped as follows. Comparative Studies: The exploration of non-Christian traditions with special emphasis on comparative religious questions. Philosophy of Religion: The study of conceptual issues that bear upon method in theology and ethics, the philosophical clarification of religious concepts and categories, and the examination of philosophical worldviews that are alternatives to traditional Christian perspectives. Religion and the Arts: Studies concerning the nature of human imagination in visual, literary, and musical forms that have shaped the religious life and its cultural expression, both within and outside the Christian church. The inquiry is normally undertaken within the context of ministry. Study of Society: The employment of normative and social-scientific tools to comprehend and bring under ethical and theological scrutiny societal institutions (including religious ones) and ideational patterns.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

REL 914a, Islam and Christian-Muslim Encounters: Historical and Theological Dimensions  John Azumah
This course examines the historical and theological interactions and encounters between Muslims and Christians since the inception of Islam in the seventh century to the post-9/11 times. It analyzes case studies, key texts, views of notable figures and events that shaped the relations between Christians and Muslims, and the cumulative impact on contemporary relations between the two faith communities. Students are given the opportunity to examine their own perceptions of the Islamic world and how these affect interreligious relations. Particular historical, theological, and ecclesiastical approaches are examined, and guidelines for models of practical engagement are discussed. This course also allows students to discover a variety of models and principles of Muslim-Christian dialogue, with attention paid to Global North and Global South contexts. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 940a, The Chinese Theologians  Chloe Starr
This course examines select readings from Chinese church and academic theologians (including Hong Kong writers and diaspora voices) to explore the nature of Chinese Christian thought. The readings cover late imperial Roman Catholic writers, early republican Protestant thinkers, high communist-era church theologians, and contemporary Sino-Christian academic theologians. Students read primary materials in English, supplemented by background studies and lecture material to help make sense of the theological constructions that emerge. The course encourages reflection on the challenges for Christian mission in a communist context, on the tensions between church and state in the production of theologies, and on the challenges that Chinese Christianity poses for global Christian thought. Area V and Area II. 3 Course cr

REL 968a, Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism  Sally Promey and Orgu Dalgic
This interdisciplinary seminar explores the subjects of pilgrimage and religious tourism. With a few notable exceptions, case studies in class sessions focus on the United States as well as diverse Christianities across time. Students are encouraged to select presentation topics across a broad range of religions, times, and spaces. Theoretical and methodological reading assignments reflect this larger content. There are no specific prerequisites, though students are expected to be able to articulate at least one aspect of their own training and/or professional interest that is relevant to the interdisciplinary content at hand. Area V and Area III. 3 Course cr

REL 983b, China Mission  Chloe Starr
The Day Missions Collection at YDS is the strongest mission collection in the world, comprising about one third of the Divinity Library’s 500,000 volumes—and it is also the central repository in the United States for China-related mission papers. This course offers students the opportunity to complete an original research project in the library relating to mission in China, utilizing manuscript, microform, and monograph materials from the collections. For the first six weeks, students read intensively in mission history, theory, and practice, schematized through mission narratives. The next four weeks are “library lab” time: supervised reading time in special collection and archive materials within the library; reading into and developing projects while help is on hand for deciphering handwriting; providing reference tools for China, etc. The final two weeks are dedicated to research presentations and evaluation, with each student offering research findings to the class in any media chosen. Area V. 3 Course cr

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

REL 907b, Theological Aesthetics  Staff
This course is about the intersection of theology and aesthetic theory. Students read theologians and philosophers from both the tradition and the present, though the emphasis is on trying to understand the different options in the tradition. The course also considers a number of works of art—visual, musical, and literary—to focus discussion. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 910b, Philosophy of Religion  John Pittard
This course is a general introduction to the philosophy of religion, including such topics as classical and contemporary arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, the significance of religious experience, the relationship between faith and reason, possible tensions between science and religion, whether God is important to morality, and the possibility of life after death. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 965a, Faith and the Will  John Pittard
An investigation of questions concerning the nature of religious faith, the relationship of faith to the will and to desire, and the merits of various prudential, moral, and existential arguments for and against religious faith. Questions to be treated include: Is faith in some sense “meritorious” (to use Aquinas’s language)? Do the commitments of faith essentially involve believing propositions? Can belief be voluntary? Can trust or hope be voluntary? Should we hold religious beliefs to the same epistemic standards that apply to more mundane beliefs? Or should we persist in faith even if these beliefs do not meet conventional rational standards? The course explores...
these questions through writings by Aquinas, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, James, Freud, Wittgenstein, and various contemporary philosophers. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 976b, Kant's Philosophy of Religion  John Hare
This course examines Kant's thoughts about theology through all three Critiques, Lectures on Ethics, On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy, and Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason. Kant’s thoughts about theology are not only intrinsically important but are important for their influence on subsequent theology. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 988b, Virtue, Vice, and Epistemic Injustice  Clifton Granby
This seminar examines recent debates in the ethics and epistemology of testimony, giving special attention to the influence of social identity, the politics of power, and ongoing evasions of (in)justice. Prominent themes include the relationship between epistemic authority, credibility judgments, and speaker trustworthiness; epistemologies of ignorance (especially those involving race, gender, sex, and class); the promises and perils of virtue-based political praxis; the fostering of subversive practices of resistance; and the challenges that attend individual and communal transformation. We begin by examining accounts of interpersonal trust and social authority. Next, our focus shifts to how these relations become fraught under non-ideal conditions—institutional, individual, and otherwise. The second half of the course scrutinizes recent attempts to identify, resist, and transform unjust relations of power and inequality. We conclude by testing the serviceability of those proposals in specific contexts involving, but not limited to: narratives concerning space and place; racialized and gendered forms of punishment; charismatic authority; poverty and homelessness; and modes of address (and refusal) that involve silence, quiet, and retreat. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 989b, Recent Work in Analytic Philosophy of Religion  John Pittard and Keith DeRose
An advanced seminar engaging state-of-the-art work in analytic philosophy of religion, with attention given to both traditional questions and areas of emerging interest. Possible topics include theodicy, alternatives to traditional theism and naturalism, fine-tuning arguments, creation ethics, skeptical worries facing various religious and nonreligious outlooks, and norms pertaining to religious hope and commitment. Area V. 3 Course cr

RELIGION AND THE ARTS

REL 900b, Sacred Sounds: Key Issues in the Ethnomusicology of Religion  Bo kyung Im
How and why do religious practitioners around the world engage in the sonic dimensions of lived experience? What local, regional, and global histories impinge upon meanings that obtain in these sacred music practices? This course in ethnomusicology examines the complex intersectional space between sonic and religious practice in the modern world. Case studies encompass both northern and southern hemispheres and are organized thematically rather than strictly by geographic area. Through examination of topics such as postcolonialism, postsecularism, ritual and ritualization, social identity, history, and transnationalism, we address the role of power in shaping the conditions under which truth is experienced, while also carving out intellectual space for the metaphysical claims to which ethnomusicalological interlocutors bear witness. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 915b, Faith-[In]forming: Christian Poetics for the Twenty-First Century  David Mahan
This course centers on the question: “Is a Christian poetics for the twenty-first century needed, or even possible, and if so what would it look like?” From this guiding question students consider what the designation “Christian” means for theories of literature and literary-critical practices, and how other approaches to literary studies support or challenge the endeavor to formulate a Christian poetics. The beginning of the course frames the study, drawing upon efforts made by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christian writers and critics to describe a Christian poetics and/or theologies of language for modernity and postmodernity. From this theoretical framework, the remainder of the course is devoted to critical reading practices. Students examine the poetry and critical thought of select twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets, paying particular attention to form and how religious faith informs poetic vision and poetic statement, as well as critical reading. This class is pertinent for students in other religion and the arts concentrations, as well as literary studies. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 933b, Poetry and Faith  Christian Wiman
This course is designed to look at issues of faith through the lens of poetry. With some notable exceptions, the course concentrates on modern poetry—that is, poetry written between 1850 and 2013. Inevitably, the course also looks at poetry through the lens of faith, but a working assumption of the course is that a poem is, for a reader (it’s more complicated for a writer), art first and faith second. “Faith” in this course generally means Christianity, and that is the primary context for reading the poems. But the course also engages with poems from other faith traditions, as well as with poems that are wholly secular and even adamantly anti-religious. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 936a, Witnessing, Remembrance, Commemoration  Margaret Olin
Memory and its expressions structure and inform many aspects of contemporary visual culture. Beginning with Albert Camus’s novel The Plague, this seminar pursues readings about memory and witnessing chosen from among the works of such writers as Sigmund Freud, Frances Yates, Maurice Halbwachs, and the authors of the book of Genesis, as well as writings about commemoration by James Young and Pierre Nora, among others. Discussions apply these readings to the study of witnessing and memorializing as artistic practices and examine visual realizations of such works, including some monuments and memorials near campus— but with a nonexclusive emphasis on Jewish examples, such as videos in the Fortunoff archive. Student projects center on theory or on special cases of witnessing or commemoration, ritual, memorial practice, and monuments, whether built, written, aural, electronic, or played out on the streets. Area V. 3 Course cr
REL 943a, Performance behind Bars: Sacred Music, Sacred Texts, and Social Justice  Ronald Jenkins
The course meets in a maximum-security prison where students collaborate with incarcerated men on the creation of performances of theater and music inspired by their collective reading of Dante’s Divine Comedy. Students learn how to apply their skills as writers, performers, or musicians to community service even as they learn about the American criminal justice system and its relevance to Dante’s poem from a unique perspective behind bars. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 944a / MDVL 663a, From House Churches to Medieval Cathedrals: Christian Art and Architecture to the End of Gothic  Vasileios Marinis
This course examines the art associated with, or related to, Christianity from its origins to the end of Gothic. It analyzes major artistic monuments and movements in a variety of regions, paying particular attention to how art shapes and is shaped by the social and historical circumstances of the period and culture. The class considers art in diverse media, focusing on painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts. Trips to the Yale Art Gallery and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library are included. The course aims to familiarize students with key monuments of Christian architecture, sculpture, painting, and related arts, analyzing each within its particular sociocultural and theological perspective. The course stresses the importance of looking at works of art closely and in context and encourages students to develop close observation and critical visual analysis. Additionally, students are encouraged to examine the ways parallel developments in Christian theology, dogma, and liturgy are influenced by art. Area V and Area III. Prerequisites: basic knowledge of Christian history and familiarity with the Bible. 3 Course cr

REL 949a, Spiritual Topographies in Modern Poetry and Fiction  David Mahan
This course examines the role of place, and physical space, as both setting and trope in modern/postmodern poetry and fiction. Beginning with notions of sacred space(s) from Scripture, we examine works of poetry by a range of modern and contemporary poets that explore natural, domestic, and sacred spaces (including Native American poetry) and the novels Home by Marilynne Robinson, Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy, and the urban maze of Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy. Through close readings of these works, we consider how meaning is conveyed through the author’s development of physical locations and spaces as images of spiritual longing, journey, and presence, as well as windows into the human condition. Themes of the sacred and the profane, the material and the transcendental, good and evil, home and homelessness, identity and transformation, are among theologically important questions that arise from this study. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 955a, The Cult of Saints in Early Christianity and the Middle Ages  Vasileios Marinis and Felicity Harley
For all its reputed (and professed) disdain of the corporeal and earthly, Christianity lavished considerable attention and wealth on the material dimension of sainthood and the “holy” during its formative periods in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Already in the second century Christian communities accorded special status to a select few “friends of God,” primarily martyrs put to death during Roman persecutions. Subsequently the public and private veneration of saints and their earthly remains proliferated, intensified, and became an intrinsic aspect of Christian spirituality and life in both East and West until the Reformation. To do so, it had to gradually develop a theology to accommodate everything from fingers of saints to controversial and miracle-working images. This course investigates the theology, origins, and development of the cult of saints in early Christianity and the Middle Ages with special attention to its material manifestations. The class combines the examination of thematic issues, such as pilgrimage and the use and function of reliquaries (both portable and architectural), with a focus on such specific cases as the evolution of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Area V and Area III. 3 Course cr

REL 963a, Literature of Trauma  David Mahan
How can literary art respond to extreme suffering, particularly when it involves the trauma of large-scale violence and oppression, which seems to defy aesthetic response? How can literary artists fulfill a summons to bear witness and remember without vitiating the apparent senselessness of human tragedy? How do theological responses to trauma interact with those made by creative writers? This course examines these and other questions through the works of poets and novelists responding to the traumas of war (WWI poetry), genocide (Holocaust poetry and fiction), historic violence and oppression (African American, Latin American/Latinx, and Native American/Indigenous Peoples poetry and fiction), and the end of the world (apocalyptic fiction). This is not a course in clinical psychology or pastoral theology, though our themes relate to these disciplines. The class focuses on the literary-critical and theological issues that arise through close reading of these texts. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 971b, Creative Faith: Poetry  Christian Wiman
An assumption of the course is that the act of creating and the act of believing are intimately related. Indeed, for many artists they are inseparable. Students work on different forms of poetry, leading toward a longer final project that incorporates poetry and prose. We use a variety of prompts, imitation exercises, and small-group work to generate new material. This course is part seminar and part workshop. One third of the time is devoted to the reading and analysis of exemplary works of art, and the rest to discussing work done by students in the class. Enrollment limited to twelve students. Admission is at the discretion of the instructor. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 984a, Accidental Theologies  Christian Wiman
Much of the best and most durable theology is done accidentally, or incidentally. It occurs in letters, essays, notebooks, poems, and stories. It is often, if not unintentional, at least not foremost in the writer’s consciousness. It is often inextricable from biographical details and formal dynamics. It is often the very thing that gets overlooked in critical appraisals of the work. This course is designed to discuss the theology of these apparently nontheological works. It is also designed to test our faith against the various pressures exerted by these works. Area V. 3 Course cr
STUDY OF SOCIETY

REL 906Hb, American Environmental History and Values  John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker
This course provides an overview of major figures, ideas, and institutions in American environmentalism. The course explores the development of environmental awareness in America as distinct historical strands with diverse ethical concerns. It begins with an examination of Native American perspectives on land and biodiversity and then focuses on writings by Thoreau and Emerson to explore early American voices in the discourse on “nature.” Readings from Pinchot, Muir, and Leopold have been selected to investigate the emergence of conservation and forest management. The beginnings of urban and park planning are considered in relation to these positions on the management of nature. Students survey the environmental movements from the 1960s onward in readings from the social sciences and humanities. The course explores the major debates in environmental ethics and the broader reach for global ethics. Writings celebrating biodiversity are examined along with the emergence of conservation biology as an example of engaged environmental scholarship. New efforts to widen the interdisciplinary approaches toward environmental issues are introduced in investigating world religions and ecology as well as cosmology and ecology. Area III and Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 908a, The Changing Face of Community-Police-Ministry Relations in the Twenty-First Century  Anthony Campbell
The deaths of George Floyd as well as Eric Garner were captured on video because millions of smartphones were sold in the United States and throughout the world. This new twenty-first-century reality, coupled with police officers increasingly being equipped with body-worn cameras and car-mounted cameras, has been the subject of government, public, and media scrutiny thanks to a large number of high-profile and usually race-related police-public interactions. Like never before, policing in America is changing, and therefore the roles and responsibilities of the community must change. Perhaps the greatest change should be seen in the community of faith’s role in defining and shaping exactly what “good community policing” must look like in today’s world. This course explores not only the changes that have taken place. More importantly, it explores the changes that are happening now within the framework of law enforcement; it challenges the community and the clergy (those in ministry) with questions as to how they can be effective agents of change and significantly increase their power to influence the changing landscape of law enforcement and thereby determine what the face of community-police-ministry relations looks like in the twenty-first century and beyond. Students in this course are expected to bring an open mind and a willingness to participate in real, down-to-earth discussions about realities that affect the whole of society. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 972a, Pandemic Ethics  Jennifer Herdt
Our ongoing experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the ways in which it threatens already vulnerable populations, raise a host of urgent ethical questions. Some of these are often discussed within medical ethics: How are scarce medical resources to be allocated? What of other frontline workers, who assumed no such special duties, but are nevertheless at higher risk? What moral principles guide vaccine development and testing? Others are addressed by the discipline of public health ethics: Are governments justified in imposing quarantines that limit individuals’ ability to earn a living? How are infringements of liberty for the sake of public health to be justified? What constitutes just access to health care, and how is this access to be secured? What do we as a society owe to those working on the front lines? To those at greater risk due to their impoverishment or incarceration? Other questions have to do with the ethical use of information technologies and big data: Is it justifiable to use cell phone data for tracing purposes? Does this unjustly interfere with rights to privacy, and under what conditions? Yet other issues are raised as the COVID-19 pandemic draws attention to, or distracts from, other matters: systemic racism (blacks in the United States were, as of May 2020, three times as likely to die of COVID-19 as whites), the climate crisis, animal welfare. This course offers an opportunity to reflect on these questions, guided by leading scholarship in bioethics, public health ethics, and data science ethics, informed by Christian ethical reflection, and in dialogue with current events. Area V and Area II. Prerequisite: one graduate-level course in ethics or systematic theology. 3 Course cr