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 917b, Asian Religions and Ecology  Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim
This course introduces students to Asian religious traditions and their intersection with ecology. The first half of the course explores the South Asian religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. The second half examines the East Asian religious traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and East Asian Buddhism. These traditions are studied in the context of the emerging field of religion and ecology. The course identifies developments in religious traditions that highlight their ecological implications for the contemporary period. In particular, it relates religious concepts, textual analysis, ritual activities, and institutional formations to engaged, on-the-ground environmental projects. It investigates the symbolic and lived expressions in religious ethics and practices that can be defined as religious ecologies. Similarly, it identifies narratives in South Asian religious traditions and in East Asian religious traditions that orient humans to the cosmos, namely, religious cosmologies. This interrelationship of narratives and religious environmentalism provides pathways into the study of religion and ecology. At present the rapid modernization in South Asia and East Asia is causing extreme environmental problems, and we investigate Asian religions in relation to this ecological crisis. Both the problems and promise of religions are acknowledged. Religions are now widely seen as significant social, intellectual, and spiritual forces that both shape and are shaped by cultural worldviews. Moreover, the symbolic language of religions often evokes nature’s processes and reflects nature’s rhythms. The multiform roles of religions, then, provide historical sources for reflection upon human behavior guided by values embedded in individuals and social bodies, projected onto ecosystems, and molded into cosmological narratives. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 919b, The Passion in the Eighteenth Century  Markus Rathey
The Passion of Christ is a seminal text not only for the Christian faith; the story has also inspired countless composers to set the words to music. Especially during the eighteenth century, at a time when sacred music had adopted stylistic devices from the operatic stage to express human emotions, the tradition of passion composition reaches its dramatic peak. The course surveys the multitude of ways in which eighteenth-century composers and musicians responded to the passion narrative. The topics range from liturgical chanting of the passion in different Christian traditions to Bach’s settings for the Lutheran liturgy, and from dramatic settings based on a text by opera librettist Metastasio to the function of music in Mexican passion plays in Nahuatl. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 930a, Introduction to American Judaism: Religion, People, Culture  James Ponet
This course enables students of all religions and backgrounds to gain basic knowledge and insight into the various forms of present-day American Judaism, its religious as well as secular expressions. The course explores theological and atheological forms of Jewish commitment—such as Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Cultural, Zionist, and Renewal—and searches for traits shared by these traditions. The course is of particular interest to Christians who seek to develop their own sense of living relationship with Jews and Judaism. Questions with a place in class discussion include: Is there a shared Jewish-Christian narrative? Can Christianity be meaningfully understood as a form of Judaism? How might a Christian live with, and in response to, the history of Christian anti-Judaism? Area V. 3 Course cr

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

REL 921b, Metaphysics and Epistemic Self-Trust  John Pittard
A consideration of arguments that purport to show that some worldview or metaphysical outlook is rationally incompatible with epistemic self-trust (either in general, or in some important domain like morality). Possible topics include skeptical worries posed by contemporary cosmological theories, by causal determinism, by atheistic and theistic multiverse theories, by materialist accounts of mind, by Darwinian evolution, and by theistic responses to the problem of evil. We also consider whether God might face irresolvable skeptical worries. Area V. 3 Course cr
REL 922b, Theological Predication and Divine Attributes  John Pittard
An exploration of philosophical debates concerning the nature of theological language and the nature of God. Topics include theories of analogical predication, divine simplicity, God’s relation to time, divine impassibility, the nature of God’s love, divine freedom, the compatibility of foreknowledge and human freedom, and theories of providence. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 958a, Science and Religion  John Pittard
A philosophical exploration of the relationship between science and religion. Questions to be treated may include the following: Does religion answer questions better left to science? Is the apparent “fine-tuning” of the physical constants evidence for a designer? Can a universe that is not designed have a purpose? Does science challenge religious perspectives on the mind, soul, and will? Is contemporary evolutionary theory compatible with the view that human beings are created in God’s image? Does the cognitive science of religion supply reasons for doubting the rationality of religious belief? Does religion inhibit effective responses to climate change and global catastrophic risks? Can the hopes and longings that animate religion be fulfilled through technological advancement? Area V. 3 Course cr

RELIGION AND THE ARTS

REL 920b, Continuing Bonds with the Dead through Art  David Mahan
From the “Lynching Memorial” to memorial tattoos, art has “remembered” the dead’s relationship to the living. But does it do more? Do artworks attest only to the dead’s absence, or do they also foster the dead’s presence? Can art enable the living to maintain an ongoing relationship with the dead, and if so, how? And what about those who never knew the dead? Can art establish new relationships between them? In the wake of a pandemic that has deprived so many of the opportunity to be with loved ones at the time of their deaths, such questions have become even more pressing. Through an examination of primarily contemporary works of art, this course explores these questions through the lens of the “continuing bonds” model of bereavement. We traverse a wide array of visual, literary, liturgical, and digital artistic practices in order to explore both the potential and limitations of art to enable the living to maintain relational bonds with those who are deceased. Our exploration considers various religious and philosophical frameworks that underlie our understandings of death and the continuing “existence” of the dead, and thus influence our reception and interpretation of what these works can and actually do. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 923a, Herbert and Hopkins in the Twenty-First Century  Christian Wiman
George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins are two of the most powerful and durable devotional poets in the English language. They were both priests, both torn between religious and artistic intensities, both possessed of rapturous and sometimes scalding visions. They are also, as poets, utterly unlike each other. This course closely examines the work of these two poet-priests and also traces their influence into the work of four very diverse contemporary poets. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 923b, Letters to God: Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum, Edith Stein  Christian Wiman
Though Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum, and Edith Stein never met each other, their lives and works seem provocatively and inevitably linked together. All were born Jewish and had their lives defined by the Second World War. All were deeply affected by the teachings of Christ (only Stein actually converted). All died young, two in the same concentration camp. All lived intense and idiosyncratic spiritual lives and forged forms of writing that expressed this spirituality. This course closely examines the writings of Weil, Hillesum, and Stein to glean essential connections—and the equally essential differences—among them. It also examines some more recent works that owe clear debts to these earlier writers. 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 933a, Theologizing Immigration: Latinxs and the Catholic Tradition  Staff
National politics and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to policies and rhetoric that limit human mobility to the United States and impose significant harms on migration at the U.S. southern border. What do migration experts and Latinx theologians say about the current moment? How do Latinx biblical and theological scholars engage critically and imaginatively the issues of human mobility, through biblical and theological reflection on current immigration realities? This seminar presents various perspectives on human mobility of migrants from Latin America to the United States and the reception these migrants receive upon arrival to the United States. We read leading immigration experts and Latinx theologians (including biblical scholars) and study how they respond to the most pressing issues of the day—including deterrence policies, the pandemic, xenophobia, gender, racialization, child migration, human trafficking, queer migrations, and forced migrations, to name a few. The course also examines the Catholic Church’s pastoral writings on migrants and immigration. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 943a, Gospel, Rap, and Social Justice: Prison and the Arts  Staff
Students in this course collaborate with formerly incarcerated musicians and other survivors of prison to create performances inspired by their collective reading of Dante’s Divine Comedy, Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, and a variety of texts documenting the impact of the carceral state on communities of color. Students learn how to apply the arts to community service and activism as they learn about the American criminal justice system and its relevance to Dante’s poem from a social justice perspective. Area V. 3 Course cr
REL 945a / 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 skills of 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 946b, God’s Trombones: Contemporary Black Women Preachers in Literature and Music  Staff
Using James Weldon Johnson’s 1927 text as a foundation, this course centers the figures of contemporary black women preachers as artists of oration who use their sermonic pens to assert political and social freedom in African American literature and sound. Amalgamating sermon and song, this course examines twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary representations of black women preachers in the oeuvres of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ann Allen Shockley, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, the Rev. Dr. Katie G. Cannon, and other writers who efficaciously mark the voices of black women preachers in African American literature. This course is also designed to show how these texts take an interdisciplinary path in literature, music, and religious studies. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 953a, Reading Poetry Theologically  David Mahan
This course explores poetry and the study of poetry as forms of theological discourse. Through close readings of individual poems and poetic sequences, students consider how the form as well as the subject matter of the poetry opens up new horizons for illuminating and articulating theological themes. With selections from twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets, the course examines how modern and late-modern poets have created fresh embodiments of faith perspectives and have contributed to both the expressive and reflective tasks of theology. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 955b, 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 964b, Imagining the Apocalypse: Scripture to Modern Fiction  David Mahan
This course explores the literary-theological and sociological facets of the apocalyptic, primarily through modern works of the imagination. Sessions begin with an introduction to various definitions and ideas of the apocalyptic, with special reference to biblical literature in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament. From these distinctively theological/religious visions, in which God is the primary actor and God’s people figure as the main subjects, the course explores how that framework for the apocalyptic has undergone significant transformations in the literary imagination of late-modern, particularly Western, societies. Through such prose works as A Canticle for Leibowitz by Walter Miller, Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood, and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, the course considers how literary portrayals of apocalypse contemplate themes that resonate with significant theological concerns. Area V. 3 Course cr

STUDY OF SOCIETY
REL 966Hb, Environmental History and Values  Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim
This course provides an overview of the intellectual developments, leading figures, and major concerns of the environmental movement. The course explores environmental issues as distinct historical strands with diverse ethical and ethnic concerns regarding land, forests, rivers, law, and people. The course identifies past challenges and present transformations in topics such as conservation and preservation, pollution and inequity, and ecojustice and governance. The beginning of the course focuses on the historical roots of American environmentalism such as the roles of Thoreau and Muir as early American voices in the discourse on “nature”; the historic place of Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold as early leaders of the environmental movement, key figures in the YSE lineage, and now as subjects of critical intellectual inquiry; and Native American worldviews on land, biodiversity, relationality, and community. The course's middle section examines global topics in environmental history, including urban ecology and city planning, history of the environmental movement, toxicity and the impact of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, environmental justice, and environmentalism in China. Finally, new efforts to widen interdisciplinary approaches to environmental issues are introduced, namely: environmental humanities, and religion and ecology. Area V and Area III. 3 Course cr
REL 984a, Theological Bioethics: Ecumenical Christian Perspectives  Staff
This course engages a wide breadth of contemporary bioethical issues, including ethical theories and approaches, early life issues, genomics, pharmaceutics, research, organ transplantation, and end of life. Students are not required to agree with any certain perspectives on these issues, but an ecumenical Christian theological perspective is engaged seriously in this course. Students are encouraged to engage any variety of perspectives on these issues for the purposes of comparing and contrasting with Christian perspectives, especially those of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, expounded by the authors in the selected readings. With developments in technology and media, one is always learning, adapting, and engaging timely moral issues all while questioning the presuppositions that inform ethical systems and approaches. Students are encouraged to refer to their own experiences, majors, and fields throughout the course while reflecting critically on each week's topic(s). Area V and Area II.  3 Course cr