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 916b, Themes in World Christianity  Chloe Starr
This course examines the nature of "World Christianity" as an entity and an academic discipline. "World Christianity" signifies the rethinking of the nature of Christianity, the church, and its theology in a post-Western world. The course starts from the geographic and demographic scope of Christianity across the globe today and considers why the proprietorial control of the field by northern churches continues in theology, history, and theological education. Readings begin with the theories of translation of Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls that shaped the field in the 1980s and proceed through a variety of approaches centered around history, migration, mission, and public and Pentecostal theologies. There are no separate "regional" studies of particular areas of the world church, but the final two weeks of the course are set aside for presentations, when students are invited to construct a project applying the readings to an area of the world church they know well. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 924a, Foundations of Islam: Understanding Muslim Tradition, Practice, and Encounter  Abdul-Rehman Malik
What is Islam? This course provides a comprehensive introduction to understanding and engaging with Islamic tradition, practice, and culture that will enable students to offer answers to this far from straightforward question. In particular, the course engages with Islam as a living tradition—a vibrant faith that is constantly and dynamically being developed, challenged, practiced, and lived. Three core themes run through the course: tradition, practice, and encounter. The course is especially designed to provide M.Div. and M.A.R. students with the language, vocabulary, terminology, foundational knowledge, and perspectives to begin—or further—their study and engagement with Islamic theology, texts, and ideas in particular, and with Muslim life in general. Special attention is paid to how Islam has developed—and is developing—in the United States, particularly through the lenses of liberation theologies, gender and race. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 930b, 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 archeological 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

REL 940a, The Chinese Theologians  Chloe Starr
This course examines select readings from Chinese church and academic theologians (including some 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 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 600,000 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; and reading into and developing projects while help is on hand for deciphering handwriting, providing reference tools, etc. The final two weeks are dedicated to research presentations and evaluation, with each student offering findings to the class in any media chosen. Area V. 3 Course cr
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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 960b, Free Will, Human and Divine  John Pittard
A consideration of philosophical debates concerning the existence, nature, and value of free will. Special attention is given to the relevance of these debates to theism (and to the bearing of theistic belief on these debates). Questions considered include the following: Do the laws of nature "leave space" for the exercise of human free will? Could someone be morally responsible for decisions that were necessitated by factors not under their control? What conception of free will (if any) is presupposed by rational deliberation? Could the value of free will, or the forms of responsibility that free will makes possible, help to explain how God could justifiably permit heinous evil? If God necessarily does what is best, can God still act freely? Area V. Prerequisite: some previous coursework in Philosophy. 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

RELIGION AND THE ARTS

REL 902b, Literary Appropriations: Writers and Philosophers in Conversation  David Mahan
This course examines the relationship between literary authors and the philosophers (and theologians) who influenced them, or whom they influenced. In addition to exploring philosophical influences in the literary work as a way of illuminating our understanding of it, the course considers how the literary work helps us understand the points the philosophers and theologians are making. In terms of how literature and philosophy relate to each other more broadly, we ask several guiding questions, including: How do we understand ways the imagination functions in both undertakings? How might literature be regarded as one way of "doing" philosophy or theology? How do the respective critical methods of these different disciplines collide or collaborate in the effort to hold forth meaning? We proceed with five pairs of conversations, each of which forms two seminar sessions. These paired conversations include Plato and Iris Murdoch, Duns Scotus and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Soren Kierkegaard and Walker Percy, John Calvin and Marilynne Robinson, and a Womanist theologian and African American woman writer, both yet to be determined. For our literary authors there is select poetry or one of their novels, as well as short critical work that exemplifies the philosophical influence under consideration. Previous experience in the study of literature and/or philosophy or theology would be helpful background. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 943a, Gospel, Rap, and Social Justice: Prison and the Arts  Ronald Jenkins
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 948b, Women of the Gospel: Jackson, Clark, Caesar, Franklin  Braxton Shelley
This course studies the black gospel tradition, focusing on the genre's distinctive combination of sound and belief while paying special attention to the contributions of women musicians to black gospel. Music, movement, and conviction—the three expressions gospel holds together—are explored through three interpretive lenses: exemplary performers, pivotal periods, and formal processes. As it taries with the music of Mahalia Jackson, Mattie Moss Clark, Aretha Franklin, and Shirley Caesar, the class brings material and approaches from the fields of musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology, black studies, homiletics, and theology to bear on two questions: (1) What work—musical, cultural, and spiritual—does gospel do for its various audiences? and (2) How does the function of the gospel song shape its form? Through a combination of weekly reading, listening, and writing assignments, students immerse themselves in "the gospel imagination," the network of belief, performance, and reception that sustains many expressions of black Christian faith. Alongside these assignments, students undertake composition in the gospel style, culminating in a performance of their musical creation. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 952a, Staging Mysteries: the Legacy of Medieval Biblical Drama, Past and Present  Carla Neuss
While The Phantom of the Opera holds the honor of the longest-running production on Broadway at 34 years, medieval mystery cycles trump it in their annual performances from roughly the eleventh to sixteenth centuries throughout Western Europe. This course traces the development and history of the medieval mystery cycle tradition, in which the biblical narrative was staged for the purpose of the "augmentation of the Catholic faith" in order to lead "common people to devotion and sound doctrine" (Chester Cycle banns). We analyze key episodes from a variety of surviving mystery cycle manuscripts, exploring the devotional and doctrinal purposes of these plays as well as their civic, social, and, at times, subversively political valences. The second half of the course traces the legacy and afterlives of mystery cycle tradition in modern performance. We look at a range of adaptations of mystery cycles as well as modern drama.
that reinvents the mystery play genre for secular purposes, from the Soviet era *Mystery Bouffe* (1918) to Kanye West’s operas *Mary* and *Nebuchadnezzar* (2019). Through primary and secondary texts, this course explores the following questions: How did theatre emerge from liturgy and Christian ritual? How did medieval theatre embody an encounter with the divine for its audiences? What were the effects and affects that resulted from these religious performances? And how and why does the mystery cycle continue to be reinvented by new theatre practitioners for new audiences around the world? Area V. 3 Course cr

**REL 963a, Literature of Trauma**  David Malan
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 atrocity? 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), and historic violence and oppression (African American, Latin American/Latinx, and Native American/Indigenous Peoples poetry and 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 966a, Sensational Materialities: Sensory Cultures in History, Theory, and Method**  Sally Promey
This interdisciplinary seminar explores the sensory and material histories of (often religious) images, objects, buildings, and performances as well as the potential for the senses to spark contention in material practice. With a focus on American things and religions, the course also considers broader geographical and categorical parameters so as to invite intellectual engagement with the most challenging and decisive developments in relevant fields, including recent literatures on material agencies. The goal is to investigate possibilities for scholarly examination of a robust human sensorium of sound, taste, touch, scent, and sight—and even “sixth senses”—the points where the senses meet material things (and vice versa) in life and practice. Topics include the cultural construction of the senses and sensory hierarchies; investigation of the sensory capacities of things; and specific episodes of sensory contention in and among various religious traditions. In addition, the course invites thinking beyond the “Western” five senses to other locations and historical possibilities for identifying the dynamics of sensing human bodies in religious practices, experience, and ideas. Area V and Area III.

3 Course cr

**REL 971a, 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 poems throughout the course, some with prompts, some not. This course is part seminar and part workshop. Half of the time is devoted to the reading and analysis of modern poems and half to discussing work done by students in the class. Students should have some background with poetry, both reading it and writing it. Previous workshop experience is not required. Instructor may be contacted directly to address questions/hesitations about enrolling in the course. Enrollment limited to twelve. Admission is at the discretion of the instructor. Area V. 3 Course cr

**STUDY OF SOCIETY**

**REL 911a, Political Theology in Latin America**  Staff
This course introduces students to debates about political and religious revolution that are grounded in what Ashon Crawley calls “otherwise possibility.” Students are asked to consider the role that Christian theological ideas play in enabling and perpetuating colonialism and anti-Blackness in Latin America as well as important resources that religion can offer to address these many injustices. The seminar examines Christian theological critiques of the state and other structures of domination, while also engaging with non-Christian faith traditions. In doing so, we explore how theories of fugitivity, abolition, statelessness, and the desire to be both ungoverned and ungovernable can be conceptualized as “political-theological” acts of resistance. Case studies include collective struggles in Venezuela, Brazil, and Cuba. By drawing on theories of mutual aid, students learn how practices of care, cooperation, and solidarity help people survive and mobilize communities toward collective action. As such, the course offers students a critical opportunity to examine the role of Christian theology and other faith traditions in organizing for revolutionary change. Area II and Area V.

3 Course cr

**REL 931b, Ethics, Imagination, and the Art of Living**  Clifton Granby
This seminar examines the relationship between our capacities of imagination and the quality of our ethical lives. Through the writings of Howard Thurman, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison, we examine the role of imagination and perception in our attempts to love, listen, and live well. Area II and Area V. 3 Course cr

**REL 941a, Chinese and Japanese Christian Literature**  Chloe Starr
What effect did Christianity have on modern Chinese literature, and what sort of Christianity emerges from Chinese Christian literature? Is Endō Shusakū the only Japanese Christian writer (and does Martin Scorsese’s film do justice to Endō’s novel *Silence*)? This course tackles such questions by tracing the development of a Christian literature in China and Japan from late Imperial times to the beginning of the twenty-first century, with particular focus on the heyday (in China) of the 1920s and ’30s, and on the Japanese side, on Endō’s postwar novels. Using texts available in English, the course examines how Christian ideas and metaphors permeated the literary— and revolutionary—imagination in East Asia. Though rarely clearly in evidence, the influence of Christianity on Chinese literature came directly through the Bible and church education and indirectly through translated European and Western literature. The course tests the aesthetic visions and construction of the human being from texts set among Japanese samurai in Mexico to the revolutionary throes of modern China. Area V. 3 Course cr
REL 957a, Russian Religious Thought  Mark Roosien
This seminar explores the primary thinkers and themes of modern Russian religious thought from the nineteenth-century encounter of Russian Orthodox Christianity with modern philosophy to the newly emerging, quasi-religious ideology of Putinism. The course considers the religious ideas of classic authors Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, theologians Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Berdiaev, lesser-known figures such as the revolutionary saint Mother Maria Skobtsova, and the anti-modernist stream of religious Eurasianism. The course focuses especially on the hallmark themes of Russian religious thought: What is freedom? Dare we hope for the salvation of all? What is the relationship between faith and politics? Area V and Area II.  3 Course cr

REL 961b, Eco-Theology, Environmental Ethics, and Fiction  Staff
The rapid growth of the environmental humanities in recent years stems from the recognition that the environmental crisis is not simply a problem of policy or technology. It is also – and perhaps more deeply – a problem of our fundamental orientation toward the non-human world. The challenge requires us not only to rethink basic values but also to learn to see ourselves and the world differently. Stories have always been central to how human beings understand themselves and their world. This course begins with the hypothesis that one way to reimagine ourselves and our world is through fiction. It covers most of the issues commonly addressed in courses on environmental ethics and eco-theology. We discuss ethical topics such as anthropocentrism and its alternatives, animal rights, climate change, environmental justice, and theological topics regarding the place of the non-human world in creation, fall, incarnation, and salvation. We do so, however, in an unusual way. Most of our shared texts are fictional. The fiction is accompanied by some short non-fiction texts and mini-lectures in order to introduce analytic categories. The emphasis remains, however, on wrestling with the relevant theological and ethical issues in and through engagement with narratives. Area II and Area V.  3 Course cr