RELIGIOUS STUDIES (RLST)

* RLST 102a / EAST 390a, Atheism and Buddhism  Hwansoo Kim
A critical examination of atheism and religions (Buddhism), with a focus on intellectual, religious, philosophical, and scientific debates about God, the origin of the universe, morality, evolution, neuroscience, happiness, enlightenment, the afterlife, and karma. Readings selected from philosophical, scientific, and religious writings. Authors include some of the following: Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russell, Christopher Hitchins, Richard Dawkins, Deepak Chopra, Sam Harris, Owen Flanagan, Stephen Batchelor, and the Dalai Lama.  HU

* RLST 114b, What's the Matter (with Religion)?  Stephen Davis
We (and everything around us) matter and are made of matter. When it comes to common cultural conceptions, however, religion is all too often conceived of as a purely spiritual, transcendent, and supernatural domain. This course challenges those assumptions by drawing on recent approaches that emphasize and also interrogate the power and agency of things, whether human or non-human, organic or inorganic, tangible or intangible. Part one of the course equips students with key theoretical frameworks, including thing theory, vital materialism, animacies, entanglements, symmetrical archaeology, and affect and emotion. Part two consists of deep dives into selected case studies, organized under the following thematic headings: aniconism and the immaterial, materializations of ritual practice (oracles, magic, and fetishes), apparitions and hauntings, movements and migrations, consumption and consumerism, illness and contagion, and ecology and the environment. As we traverse these topics, we encounter materialities ranging from ancient Greek rock art, Roman oracle shrines, and recipes for magical spells and visions of saints in Egypt, to devotional items confiscated from undocumented immigrants, the marketing of religion by Goldman Sachs and Kanye West, viral epidemics, and "natural" disasters. Students come away from this seminar better able to recognize and act upon what matters in the world.  HU

RLST 115b / AMST 116b, How to Build an American Religion  Kathryn Lofton
How communities can be organized through code, charisma, ritual, and cosmology. Topics include strategies for concretizing utopia and establishing communal principles, expanding audiences, and specifying creed. This course serves as an introduction to religion through theoretical readings and specific examples drawn from the transnational American scene, past and present. Discussion of particular leaders, sects, practices, and media will offer insights into how ideas organize societies and individuals establish themselves as icons. Students adapt strategies taught in the course in order to practice their own capacity to foster social movements, develop and critique brands, and consider the relationship between religion, politics, and economy.  HU

* RLST 119b / WGSS 319b, The Animal and Religion  Staff
This interdisciplinary seminar analyzes key texts formulating the question of the (non)human and animal by examining the recent proliferation of work on animality, not only in religious studies, but also in Black studies, gender studies, philosophy, and anthropology. The course critically examines key accounts of religion and the animal in relation to colonialism, capitalism, race, gender, sexuality, and class. Questions explored include: What does animal religion or religious animality look like? How is the category of religion understood with respect to the nonhuman or less-than-human? What is the relationship of conceptions of the (non)human in modernity to the slave trade and colonialism? How do notions of personhood, spirituality, dominion, evolution, empathy, and cosmology relate to the (non)human and animal?  HU

* RLST 121a / EALL 296a / EAST 391a, Religion and Culture in Korea  Hwansoo Kim
Introduction to Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Christianity, and new religions in Korea from ancient times to the present. Examination of religious traditions in close relationships with social, economic, political, and cultural environments in Korean society. Examination of religious tensions, philosophical arguments, and ethical issues that indigenous and foreign religions in Korea have engaged throughout history to maximize their influence in Korean society.  HU

* RLST 128a / CLCV 307a, Emotion and Identity in Antiquity  Staff
“Are you what you feel.” But how much control do we have over how we feel? Does—or can—even experience the world through the same categories of feeling, or “emotions”? To what extent are people’s emotional options constrained or scripted by aspects of identity such as religion, gender, class, and culture? This seminar explores the connections between emotions and identity in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world, with reference to modern theories of emotion along the way. Topics covered include (1) ancient theories of what emotions are and how they relate to the "self"; (2) norms concerning which emotions are “proper” and for whom (including humans, animals, and gods; women and men; and “pagans,” Jews, and Christians); and (3) practical methods used to cultivate certain emotions over others.  HU

RLST 145a / HUMS 133a / JDST 110a, The Bible  Christine Hayes
The writings common to both Jewish and Christian scripture examined as diverse and often conflicting expressions of the religious life and thought of ancient Israel. The works’ cultural and historical setting in the ancient Near East; the interpretive history of selected passages influential in Western culture. Introduction to a wide range of critical and literary approaches to biblical studies. Students view course lectures, which survey the entire Bible, on line; class time focuses on specific biblical passages and their subsequent interpretation in Jewish and Christian culture.  HU

RLST 148a / ER&M 219a / HIST 219a / JDST 200a / MMES 149a, Jewish History and Thought to Early Modern Times  Ivan Marcus
A broad introduction to the history of the Jews from biblical beginnings until the European Reformation and the Ottoman Empire. Focus on the formative period of classical rabbinic Judaism and on the symbiotic relationships among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jewish
society and culture in its biblical, rabbinic, and medieval settings. Counts toward either European or non-Western distributional credit within the History major, upon application to the director of undergraduate studies.  

RLST 160a / HIST 280a / ITAL 315a, The Catholic Intellectual Tradition  Carlos Eire
Introductory survey of the interaction between Catholicism and Western culture from the first century to the present, with a focus on pivotal moments and crucial developments that defined both traditions. Key beliefs, rites, and customs of the Roman Catholic Church, and the ways in which they have found expression; interaction between Catholics and the institution of the Church; Catholicism in its cultural and sociopolitical matrices. Close reading of primary sources.  

* RLST 175b / EAST 431b, North Korea and Religion  Hwansoo Kim
Ever since the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948 and the Korean War (1950–1953), North Korea has been depicted by the media as a repressive, oppressive, and military country, its leaders as the worst dictators, and its people as brainwashed, tortured, and starving to death. The still ongoing Cold War discourse, intensified by the North Korea's recent secret nuclear weapons program, furthers these negative images, and outsiders have passively internalized these images. However, these simplistic characterizations prevent one from gaining a balanced understanding of and insight into North Korea and its people on the ground. Topics other than political, military, and security issues are rarely given attention. On the whole, even though North Korea’s land area is larger than South Korea and its population of 25 million accounts for a third of all Koreans, North Korea has been neglected in the scholarly discussion of Korean culture. This class tries to make sense of North Korea in a more comprehensive way by integrating the political and economic with social, cultural, and religious dimensions. In order to accomplish this objective, students examine leadership, religious (especially cultic) aspects of the North Korean Juche ideology, the daily lives of its citizens, religious traditions, the Korean War, nuclear development and missiles, North Korean defectors and refugees, human rights, Christian missionary organizations, and unification, among others. Throughout, the course places North Korean issues in the East Asian and global context. The course draws upon recent scholarly books, articles, journals, interviews with North Korean defectors, travelogues, media publications, and visual materials.  

* RLST 192b / JDST 297b, Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in American Jewish History  Elli Stern
An exploration of how Jews in American negotiated, and renegotiated, religion and ethnicity to forge a hyphenated American identity. Topics include the impact of Protestant domination, immigrant experiences and legacies, the role of discrimination, and self-presentation and representation by others. Each term prospective junior History majors should apply for seminars for the following term using the online junior seminar preregistration site. Preregistration begins after midterm in the fall for seminars offered in the spring term, and after spring recess for seminars offered in the subsequent fall term. In September and in January, application for admission should be made directly to the instructors of the seminars, who will admit students to remaining vacancies in their seminars. Priority is given to applications from juniors, then seniors, majoring in History, but applications are also accepted from qualified sophomores and from students majoring in other disciplines or programs.  

* RLST 210a / PHIL 206a, Nietzsche, Religion, History  Nancy Levene
An exploration of Nietzsche’s concepts of religion and history and of his thinking in a broad historical arc up to the present. Course material includes texts by Nietzsche and selections from philosophies, theologies, and works of art that invite dialogue with his ideas.  

* RLST 214a / HIST 248a / JDST 293a, Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought  Elli Stern
An overview of Jewish philosophical trends, movements, and thinkers from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first. Topics include enlightenment, historicism, socialism, secularism, religious radicalism, and Zionism.  

* RLST 215a / AMST 356a, Celebrity, Politics, Power  Kathryn Lofton
This course uses celebrity to think about American political power. Informed by American studies, gender studies, and religious studies, the course considers celebrity a way to talk about how popularity is an embodied and spiritualized appraisal. The bibliography on celebrity and politics is not a robust one, despite the fact that winning elections requires popularity and in the last twenty years of American politics some conscientiousness of the skill sets celebrities mastered seems a precondition for electoral success. The course assembles a range of scholarly and archival resources to think about what it means to achieve celebrity, and how it is a political form of public life. Of particular interest is how to think about the construction of magic and charisma, and how those very idioms often contribute to accusations of mesmerism and manipulation. Written assignments focus students on developing celebrity as an applied knowledge for social media development and political progress.  

* RLST 225a / EAST 406a / EAST 506a / RLST 628a, Paradise in Buddhism: Pure Land Traditions  Staff
Pure Land Buddhism is a tradition with roots in India that developed most extensively in East Asia. Unlike other forms of Buddhism, it centers on a paradise motif and is largely devotional in character. It arises from scriptural stories about a transcendent Buddha named Amida who vows to bring all living beings to enlightenment via an other-worldly realm known as the Pure Land. The seminar examines this tradition historically against the backdrop of Buddhism in general, focusing on the Pure Land sutras and the unfolding of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Among the goals of the course is to develop familiarity with the structure of the sutras and with classical Buddhology, the core concepts and strategies of Buddhist doctrine and story-making. It also explores the teachings of several celebrated Japanese Buddhists, the portrayal of women in texts and religious practices, and the demythologization of Pure Land and Amida in the modern period.  

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* RLST 233a / ENGL 346a / HUMS 253a, Poetry and Faith  Christian Wiman

Issues of faith examined through poetry, with a focus on modern poems from 1850 to the present. Poems from various faith traditions studied, as well as to secular and antireligious poetry.  

* RLST 256a / FILM 336a / MMES 311a, Social Change in Middle East Cinemas  Staff

This course invites students to explore how modern aesthetic forms such as cinemas from the Middle East and North Africa critique rigid social realities and imagine modern social experiences, thereby pushing boundaries towards social change. By chronologically examining Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, and Persian films in different historical periods, we will explore how film as art reveals the nature of social myth and the role public intellectuals play in perpetuating or challenging that myth. In addition to weekly film screenings (with English subtitles), course material includes short readings on the modern history of the region, history of film production, and analysis of film as art. By the end of this course, students will learn about the history of filmmaking in the MENA region, the different questions (religion, class, language, gender, ethnicity, race, nationalism and colonialism) influencing the production and reception of film, the challenges facing the filmmaker as an artist and producer and more importantly how these challenges impact the imagination of social change on the screen.

RLST 262a / ARCH 272a / HSAR 150a, Introduction to the History of Art: Art and Architecture of the Sacred  Jacqueline Jung

A wide-ranging, cross-temporal exploration of religious images, objects, and architecture in diverse cultures, from ancient Mesopotamia to modern Manhattan. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and various polytheistic traditions are represented. Thematic threads include the human body; transformations of nature; death, memory, and afterlife; sacred kingship and other forms of political engagement; practices of concealment and revelation; images as embodiments of the divine; the framing and staging of ritual through architecture.  

RLST 290a / MMES 290a / PLSC 435a, Islam Today: Jihad and Fundamentalism  Frank Griffel

Introduction to modern Islam, including some historical background. Case studies of important countries in the contemporary Muslim world, such as Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Islam as a reactive force to Western colonialism; the ideals of Shari’a and jihad; violence and self-sacrifice; and Islam as a political ideology.  

* RLST 324a, The Global Right: From the French Revolution to the American Insurrection  Elli Stern

This seminar explores the history of right-wing political thought from the late eighteenth century to the present, with an emphasis on the role played by religious and pagan traditions. This course seeks to answer the question, what constitutes the right? What are the central philosophical, religious, and pagan, principles of those groups associated with this designation? How have the core ideas of the right changed over time? We do this by examining primary tracts written by theologians, political philosophers, and social theorists as well as secondary literature written by scholars interrogating movements associated with the right in America, Europe, Middle East and Asia. Though touching on specific national political parties, institutions, and think tanks, its focus is on mapping the intellectual overlap and differences between various right-wing ideologies. While the course is limited to the modern period, it adopts a global perspective to better understand the full scope of right-wing politics.  

* RLST 408b / JDST 400b, Interpreting the Bible in Antiquity: Case Studies  Christine Hayes

Examines the rich and polyphonic tradition of interpretation of two biblical narratives that were classical loci of Jewish-Christian polemic. Beginning with inner-bible exegesis, and continuing with ancient translations, Second Temple and Hellenistic period literature, early Christian sources, and finally classical rabbinic texts, this course explores the interpretative techniques and rhetorical strategies of ancient readers (especially midrash and allegory) and considers the way sacred texts have been employed to stand out competing intellectual and cultural claims. Prerequisite: reading proficiency in Hebrew.  

* RLST 420a, Introduction to Syriac Christianity  Maria Doerfler and Travis Zadeh

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 its 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 further requires attendance for three special sessions: a visit to the Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscripts Library and its considerable Syriac manuscript holdings; a visit to the Yale University Art Gallery and its collection of relevant artefacts and coins; and an introduction to the use of digital humanities in Syriac Studies through the Yale Digital Dura-Europos Archive (YDEA). Permission of Instructor is required.  

* RLST 428b / ANTH 428b / PHIL 493b, Neighbors and Others  Nancy Levene

This course is an interdisciplinary investigation of concepts and stories of family, community, borders, ethics, love, and antagonism. Otherwise put, it concerns the struggles of life with others – the logic, art, ethnography, and psychology of those struggles. The starting point is a complex of ideas at the center of religions, which are given to differentiating "us" from "them" while also identifying values such as the love of the neighbor that are to override all differences. But religion is only one avenue into the motif of the neighbor, a fraught term of both proximity and distance, a contested term and practice trailing in its wake lovers, enemies, kin, gods, and strangers. Who is my neighbor? What is this to ask and what does the question ask of us? Course material includes philosophy, anthropology, psychology, fiction, and film.
* RLST 429b, Phenomenology  Noreen Khawaja
In-depth introduction to phenomenology as a theory of what is and as a method for studying it. Key figures in the history of phenomenology, emphasizing connections to social theory, aesthetics, and religion. Readings from Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Fanon, Husserl, Ahmed, Barad, and others.  

* RLST 435a / AFAM 402a, Black Religions in Slavery and Freedom  Nicole Turner
This course explores how enslaved and free black people created and sustained religious communities in the United States during the eras of slavery and freedom. It explores the resonances of African traditions, the role of conjure, Islam and Christianity in sustaining Black people through slavery and the transformations that developed after emancipation. The course challenges the paradigm of black religion as always pointing toward freedom while exploring how the transition in status from enslaved to free was reflected in and influenced by black religious practices and communities. This course explores the religious communities of the “slave quarters,” underground railroad, independent black churches on the political landscape of freedom through the end of the 19th century. This course aims to provide participants with a deeper exploration of the developments within the period from the 19th century through 1915 and the advent of Jim Crow and U.S. imperialism.

* RLST 485a, African American Religious History  Nicole Turner
A seminar focused on the history of African American religions. African American religions are dynamic and multifaceted. Often depicted as sources of black resilience and emblems of black resistance, African American religions have also been criticized for marginalizing and racializing black people, as well as encoding archaic gender paradigms and reinforcing class divisions. This course explores the ways histories of African American religions have produced these various interpretive frames. Questions that animate the course include: What role have African American religions played in African American life? How have scholars studied the history of African American religions and ultimately shaped the discourse about African American religious life, and by extension African American history? This course resolves these questions through an examination and production of historical writing. Intended for advanced students pursuing specific senior-level research. 

* RLST 486a / EALL 221a, Introduction to Chinese Buddhist Literature  Eric Greene
This class is an introduction to Chinese Buddhist literature. Although written in classical Chinese, Buddhist texts in China were written in a particular idiom that was much influenced by the Indian languages and which can be difficult to understand without special training. This class introduces students who already have some reading ability in literary Chinese to this idiom and the tools and background knowledge needed to read and understand Chinese Buddhist literature. We read a series of selections of some of the most influential Chinese Buddhist texts from various genres including canonical scriptures, apocryphal scriptures, monastic law, doctrinal treatises, and hagiography. Secondary readings introduce the basic ideas of Indian and Chinese Buddhist thought to the extent necessary for understanding our readings. Prerequisite: CHNS 171 (Literary Chinese II) or equivalent, or permission of the instructor. Students of Japanese or Korean literature who can read basic kanbun or gugyeol are also welcome to enroll; no knowledge of modern, spoken Chinese is required. 

* RLST 488a, Individual Tutorial  Staff
For students who wish, under faculty supervision, to investigate an area in religious studies not covered by regular departmental offerings. The course may be used for research or for directed reading. A long essay or several short ones are required. To apply, students should present a prospectus with bibliography of work they propose to undertake to the director of undergraduate studies together with a letter of support from the faculty member who will direct the work.

* RLST 490a, Religion and Society  Eric Greene
Seminar on religion and society. Topics covered vary by year, but may include one or more of the following: ritual and its social functions, different concepts of social life, the operation of violence in social relationships, religion as both champion and critic of society, and theoretical models of religion and society.

* RLST 491a and RLST 492b, The Senior Essay  Travis Zadeh
Students writing their senior essays meet periodically in the fall and weekly in the spring for a colloquium directed by the director of undergraduate studies. The essay, written under the supervision of a member of the department, should be a substantial paper between 12,500 and 15,000 words.