RELLIGIOUS STUDIES (RLST)

* RLST 022a / ENGL 031a, Religion and Science Fiction  Maria Doerfler
Survey of contemporary science fiction with attention to its use and presentation of religious thought and practice. Focus on the ways in which different religious frameworks inform the literary imagination of this genre, and how science fiction in turn creates religious systems in both literature and society. Enrollment limited to first-year students. Preregistration required; see under First-Year Seminar Program.  

* RLST 100a / MMES 191a, Introduction to World Religions  Gerhard Bowering
Introduction to the literature, ideals, concepts, practices, rituals, and institutions of four major world religions as they have appeared in history: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. A historical survey combined with a phenomenological treatment of principal topics.  

* RLST 101a / AFAM 201a, Politics of Black Religion  Nicole Turner
This course explores black religions as sites of political engagement and as the object of political concern in the context of national formation. In particular, the course explores how Africans kidnapped into the transatlantic slave trade, Africans enslaved in the Americas, and their emancipated descendants used religions to resist dehumanization of enslavement and to foster communities of hope and love. Further, this course explores the complications of forming religious community within the confines of race, slavery, colonialism, and freedom including gender, class, and social conflicts. Finally, the course explores how scholars in various disciplines have created black religions as objects of study. Course materials include biographies, autobiographies, primary accounts of religious life and records of religious organizations. Students come away from the course with an enhanced sense of the complexities of black religious life and the evolution of black religions as central social and political agents in black life and the black freedom struggle. Class discussions and analyses will fill your toolbox with both methodological approaches to primary sources and technical tools for writing.  

* RLST 104a / AFAM 264a / HUMS 120a, Memory, Culture, and Religion  Stephen Davis
This course investigates the constructive role that cultural memory plays in the shaping of religious identity and practice. In addition to the study of cognitive, sociological, and political theories and their application, students explore topics from the ancient Greco-Roman world and the New Testament to contemporary history, politics, and media culture. By the end of the semester, students are equipped to think in multilateral ways about how transpersonal forms of memory and memory practices have shaped cultural and religious identity from antiquity to the present day.  

* RLST 115b / AMST 116b, How to Build an American Religion  Kathryn Loon
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.  

* RLST 116a, Monasticism in Comparative Perspective  Hwansoo Kim
One of the most common themes of monasticism around the world from antiquity to the present is the idea that people who undertake the monastic lifestyle are in some sense separate from “the world” or society at large, and consequently that monastic lifestyles constitute an alternative to the norms that structure most people’s lives. This seminar explores the ways in which monastics – both individually and communally – have negotiated their status as “separate” through a variety of social, religious, economic, artistic, and political practices. Throughout the course, we pose the question: how have monastics constructed, maintained, and at times refashioned their identities in different settings? Readings include both primary sources in translation and secondary scholarship, and are supplemented where possible with visual materials, documentary films, and web-based research. The course may include a field trip to an active monastic community, where students will be asked to reflect on the continuities and ruptures of monastic traditions in a modern setting. This seminar is suitable for students interested in having their first exposure to comparative approaches in the academic study of religion. It also fulfills the comparative study of religions requirement for Religious Studies majors.  

* RLST 117b, What Didn’t Make It into the Bible  Maria Doerfler
Over two billion people alive today consider the New Testament to be sacred scripture. But how did the books that made it into the bible get there in the first place? Who decided what was to be part of the bible and what wasn’t? How did these decisions affect the structure of nascent Christian communities, their relationship to surrounding Greco-Roman and Jewish society, and the subsequent development of Christian churches? How would the history of the world’s largest organized religion look differently if a given book didn’t make the final cut and another one did? Hundreds of ancient Christian texts are not included in the New Testament. This course focuses on these excluded writings and uses them to help reconstruct the earliest Christian communities. We explore Gnostic gospels, hear of a five-year-old Jesus throwing temper tantrums while killing (and later resurrecting) his classmates, peruse ancient Christian romance novels, tour heaven and hell, read the garden of Eden story told from the perspective of the snake, and learn how the world will end. In critically examining these ancient narratives and the communities that wrote them, students learn about the content and history of the New Testament, better appreciate the diversity of formative Christianity, understand the historical context of the early church, examine...
the earliest social forms of Christianity, and explore the politics behind what did and did not make it into the bible. Students previously enrolled in RLST 007 are not eligible to enroll in this course. WR, HU

* RLST 121b / EALL 296b / EAST 391b, 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 133b / PHIL 223b / SAST 258b, Indian Philosophy: Beginnings and Foundations Aleksandar Uskokov
In this course, we introduce prominent themes that preoccupied the doctrinal communities of Ancient India – Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism. These include first principles (or their absence), notions of personhood and soul (or their absence), the human good, and the means by which this human good is known. The primary objective is to survey in some depth philosophical ideas in Ancient India as they were advanced not by systematic philosophers but rather in foundational texts such as the Upaniṣads, the epics, and the Buddhist suttas. We occasionally read modern writings that attempt to engage the sources in their wider philosophical significance while keeping in mind their historical context. Knowledge of Indian languages is not required. HU

* RLST 136a, The History and Contemporary (Ab)uses of the New Testament Laura Nasrallah
The course introduces students to the historical context of New Testament texts, to the processes of its becoming scripture, and to a variety of approaches for its interpretation (evangelical, feminist, historical critical, queer, African American, etc.). We’ll discuss how the New Testament is used today in politics and culture—by political candidates, in debates about sexuality, in arguments about the environment. 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 147b / JDST 235b / MMES 235b / NELC 231b, Introduction to Judaism in the Ancient World: From Temple to Talmud Steven Fraade
The emergence of classical Judaism in its historical setting. Jews and Hellenization; varieties of early Judaism; apocalyptic and postapocalyptic responses to suffering and catastrophe; worship and atonement without sacrificial cult; interpretations of scriptures; law and life; the rabbi; the synagogue; faith in reason; Sabbath and festivals; history and its redemption. No prior background in Jewish history assumed. HU

RLST 148a / ER&M 210a / 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. HU

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. HU

* RLST 175a / EAST 431a, 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 reclusive, 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. SO

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RLST 180a / HIST 342a / SAST 280a, Mughal India, 1500–1800  Supriya Gandhi
Exploration of religion and the state in Mughal India, focusing on the period between 1500–1800. Topics include sacred sovereignty, orthodoxy, Sufism, vernacular literary and religious cultures, and the early colonial encounter.  HU

* RLST 182b / SAST 493b, Buddhist Traditions of Mind and Meditation  Eric Greene
Buddhist meditation practices examined in the context of traditional theories of mind, perception, and cognition. Readings both from Buddhist canonical works and from secondary scholarship on cognitive science and ritual practice. Recommended preparation: a course in Asian religions.  HU

* RLST 183b / SAST 366b, The Bhagavad Gita  Staff
An examination of the Bhagavad Gita in its historical and religious context. Exploration of the major interpretations of this important religious text. All readings in translation.  HU TR

* RLST 201b / HIST 233b / HUMS 443b / JDST 270b / MMES 342b, Medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims In Conversation  Ivan Marcus
How members of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities thought of and interacted with members of the other two cultures during the Middle Ages. Cultural grids and expectations each imposed on the other; the rhetoric of otherness—humans or devils, purity or impurity, and animal imagery; and models of religious community and power in dealing with the other when confronted with cultural differences. Counts toward either European or Middle Eastern distributional credit within the History major, upon application to the director of undergraduate studies.  WR, HU

RLST 202b / HIST 234b / JDST 265b / MMES 148b, Jews in Muslim Lands from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries  Ivan Marcus
Jewish culture and society in Muslim lands from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to that of Suleiman the Magnificent. Topics include Islam and Judaism; Jerusalem as a holy site; rabbinic leadership and literature in Baghdad; Jewish courtiers, poets, and philosophers in Muslim Spain; and the Jews in the Ottoman Empire.  HU

* RLST 208b, Religion and Heritage  Stephanie Machabee
This seminar introduces students to how religion, heritage, and identity intersect in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, the course asks: What are the politics of calling a religious site or religious object “heritage?” What role do anthropology and museums have in creating, proving, or rejecting narratives of the past? What motivates the destruction of religious sites, and what justifies their preservation? When and why does the international community decide to intervene in the preservation and management of heritage? We explore the definition, history, and theory behind the term “heritage” and examine how heritage discourses and institutions deal with religion and religious identity at local, national, and global levels.  HU

* RLST 211b / EALL 213b / HUMS 292b / PHIL 205b, Philosophy, Religion, and Literature in Medieval China  Lucas Bender
Exploration of the rich intellectual landscape of the Chinese middle ages, introducing students to seminal works of Chinese civilization and to the history of their debate and interpretation in the first millennium. No previous knowledge of China is assumed. Instead, the course serves as a focused introduction to Chinese philosophy, religion, and literature.  HU

* RLST 217b, Health, Science, and Religion  Cody Musselman
This course examines the intersection of health, science, and religion primarily within the American context. The readings point students towards the historical roots of contemporary health and wellness issues. Our critical approach investigates how each of our key concepts—health, science, and religion—were and are constructed with respect to race, class, gender, the state, the self, and modernity.  HU

* RLST 224b / NELC 224b, Zoroastrianism  Kayla Dang
Surveys the history of Zoroastrianism, one of the world’s oldest continuous religious traditions, from its origins in the first millennia BC to the present day. Readings in primary sources in English translation and secondary readings in modern scholarship.  HU

* RLST 226b / SAST 379a / SOCY 368a, Transnational Islam and Muslim Communities  Mehmet Kurt
This seminar explores key themes, concepts, and discussions on Islamic movements and Muslim communities living in the West. It examines the relationships between Muslim communities and the state/wider society within global and transnational processes. Students gain a comprehensive understanding of diversity and complexity of transnational Islamic mobilizations through readings and discussions of representative case studies. The seminar begins with a historical and anthropological account of locating Muslim communities in the West and proceeds with the discovery of key themes and debates. Throughout the term, students explore key issues around Islamophobia and radicalization, governance of Muslim practices, ethno-religious and cultural diversity of Muslim communities, gender and sexuality, as well as the ways in which these shape perceptions, policies and public debates in the ‘host’ countries.  SO

* RLST 233a / ENGL 346a / HUMS 253a, Poetry and Faith  Christian Wiman
Issues of faith examined through poetry, with a focus on modern Christian poems from 1850 to the present. Some attention to poems from other faith traditions, as well as to secular and antireligious poetry.  HU

* RLST 249a / GMAN 254a / JDST 332a / PHIL 274a, Jewish Philosophy  Paul Franks
Introduction to Jewish philosophy, including classical rationalism of Maimonides, classical kabbalah, and Franz Rosenzweig’s inheritance of both traditions. Critical examination of concepts arising in and from Jewish life and experience, in a way that illuminates universal problems of leading a meaningful human life in a multicultural and increasingly globalized world. No previous knowledge of Judaism is required.  WR, HU
What do scholars mean when they label religion (or other objects of study) as queer or queer-able? What assumptions about race, class, questions including: what is the relationship between queer life and religious life? Is religion ever queer? Is queerness ever religious? This interdisciplinary seminar engages a range of methods and theoretical approaches to queer studies and religion. The course explores RLST 334a / WGSS 279a, Queer Religion

* RLST 260a / AMST 451a / HIST 174Ja, Religion, War, and the Meaning of America Harry Stout The relationship between religion and war in American history from colonial beginnings through Vietnam. The religious meanings of Americans at war; the mutually reinforcing influences of nationalism and religion; war as the norm of American national life; the concept of civil religion; biblical and messianic contexts of key U.S. conflicts. HU

* RLST 272b, Mapping Black Christianity Nicole Turner This course merges research in African American religious history with the creation of an interpretive archive using digital mapping and deep mapping practices. We explore the politics of mapping, geography, and race before delving into a place-based exploration of black religious communities during the late 19th century. The course aims to investigate the extant archives of black Christian communities of the post-emancipation South: newspapers, convention and church minutes, encyclopedias and autobiographies and narratives, while applying strategies of historical analysis to explore the nature of the formation and transformation of African American religious community. The course also examines concepts of race, place, and power and how religion inflects these conceptions. The main project is to create a contribution to the mapping of black religion by exploring a single primary source in depth and then developing both summary text, curating supporting archival images, reports and other digital material culture, and a map. Emphasis on method: archival research, digital humanities, spatial analysis and politics of space and place.

* RLST 277a / PHIL 202a, Existentialism Noreen Khawaja Introduction to key problems in European existentialism. Existentialism considered not as a unified movement, but as a tradition of interlocking ideas about human freedom woven through the philosophy, religious thought, art, and political theory of late modern Europe. Readings from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heti, Lukács, Gide, Heidegger, Fanon, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Cesaire. HU

* RLST 281b, Morality and Its Critics Sarah Zager This course considers the diverse array of critiques that have been leveled at how ‘ethics’ has been discussed in the Western philosophical tradition. Some of these critiques come from within the philosophical tradition itself—Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the regnant Christian morality of his day amounted to a ‘slave morality;’ Elizabeth Anscombe argued that the enterprise of ‘modern moral philosophy’ was simply nonsensical, and Bernard Williams worried that it asked us to have ‘one thought too many.’ Others critiqued moral philosophy from the outside: some argued that it relied on sexist or racist assumptions that undermined its efforts to articulate a vision of the good and the right, and some even suggested that the discipline of ‘ethics’ should be replaced with ethnographic approaches that asked individual agents to explain their own ethical choices. In this course, we ask: What do these different critiques, drawn from disciplines including philosophy, religious studies, and even literature, have in common? How can ‘ethics’ respond to them? What parts of ‘ethics’ are not worth salvaging? HU

RLST 287a / MMES 391a, Islamic Theology and Philosophy Frank Griffel Historical survey of major themes in Muslim theology and philosophy, from teachings of the Qur’an to contemporary Muslim thought. The systematic character of Muslim thought and of the arguments given by thinkers; reason vs. revelation; the emergence of Sunnism and Shi’ism; the reaction of Muslim theology (from 1800) to the challenges of the West. HU

* RLST 302a / PHIL 311a, The End of Metaphysics Nancy Levene Exploration of metaphysics in light of the supposition that it is at an end. Readings from classics and critics in philosophy, religion, and literature. WR, HU

* RLST 310a / JDST 376a, Love and Romance in Medieval Jewish Culture Caroline Gruenbaum This course explores the fascinating body of love stories and romance in medieval Jewish culture, written mostly between the tenth and fourteenth centuries across the Mediterranean basin and Christian Europe. This corpus includes poetry, narratives, folktales, philosophical texts and chivalric romance. From magical herbs to men dressed in women’s clothing, these entertaining stories challenge our perceptions of medieval Jewish culture as a place only of religious observance and rabbinic stringency. In these stories, “love” appears in various forms with some repeating characteristics, such as the objectification of the female body, a woman’s duplicity, or the happy marriage between two suitable partners. Men are alternatively the victims and the perpetrators of horrific acts done in the name of love. Through a close reading of these texts in English translation, students learn to understand the complexities of love, marriage, and romance in medieval Jewish literary culture. No previous knowledge of Judaism, Hebrew, or medieval literature is expected. WR, HU

* RLST 333a / AMST 321a / ENGL 285a / FILM 334a, Mormonism Kathryn Lofton and John Peters For some observers, Mormonism is an epithet, a poison, a problem; for others, Mormonism is a practice, a purpose, the bread of life. It’s both wave and particle. It’s radical and conservative. It’s insane and mundane. It’s deeply weird and definitionally conventional. This is not a course that decides where one ought to sit on these oppositional terms. We ask instead what makes a subject so inspiring. We do not consider Mormonism a subject of study as much as a prompt to ask what it is to study anything. This course, the first of its kind at Yale, does not reflect the recent efflorescence of Mormon Studies as an academic subfield as much as it reacts to that intellectual excitement. We consider Mormonism as an indicative problem in the history of interpretation. HU

* RLST 334a / WGSS 279a, Queer Religion Wendy Mallette This interdisciplinary seminar engages a range of methods and theoretical approaches to queer studies and religion. The course explores questions including: what is the relationship between queer life and religious life? Is religion ever queer? Is queerness ever religious? What do scholars mean when they label religion (or other objects of study) as queer or queer-able? What assumptions about race, class,
and gender do contemporary usages of queer entail? What are the possibilities and limits of queer methods and practices? Topics include: queer methods and genealogies, HIV/AIDS and affect, lesbian feminism and exoduses, performance and humor, sodomy and orientalism, vocations and orientations.  

RLST 375b, Hindu Nationalism  Supriya Gandhi
This course analyzes the development of Hindu nationalism from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Students interrogate the emergence of Hinduism as a religion, before exploring the reform and revivalist movements in the nineteenth century that paved the way for the articulation of Hindu nationalism. Students also read from key writings of several Hindu nationalist thinkers of the twentieth century and investigate the historical and social contexts leading to the emergence of Hindu nationalism as a major political force. Topics include: colonialism, modernity, the idea of Hinduism, nationalist ideologies, gender, and religious violence.  

RLST 395a, The Letters of Paul: Ethnicity, Enslavement, Empire, and the End of the World  Laura Nasrallah
This intermediate course focuses on the letters of Paul, key documents within the Christian Bible and so-called Western philosophical thought, which were written in the context of the Roman Empire and diaspora Judaism in the ancient world and are still used today to debate ethical and political action. We’ll look at 1) the Pauline epistles in their first-century context, and their earliest interpretations; 2) recent trends in Pauline studies, including feminist, womanist, queer, and postcolonial interpretations. Special attention is given to ideas of the gendered/enslaved body and its potential for transformation and pollution, ethnicity in the Roman world, the relations of communities to Roman imperial power, and views of time and the impending eschaton.  No previous knowledge of the Bible or New Testament is presumed.  

RLST 402b / PHIL 326b, The Philosophy of Religion  John Pittard
The relation between religion and ethics, traditional arguments for the existence of God, religious experience, the problem of evil, miracles, immortality, science and religion, and faith and reason.  

* RLST 405b / JDST 392b / NELC 382b, Mishnah Seminar: Tractate Megillah  Steven Fraade
Study of rabbinc texts treating rules for the public recitation and translation of the Scroll of Esther on the holiday of Purim and of other sacred scriptures and translations throughout the year, with special attention to the relation between law and ritual and the narrativity of both. EMWAR area of concentration designations: STHJ, RabJud, ScrInterp. Prerequisite: reading fluency in ancient Hebrew.  

* RLST 410b / JDST 231b / NELC 242b, Aramaic Incantation Bowls from Sasanian Mesopotamia  Staff
This course is an introduction to the study of Aramaic Incantation Bowls designed for advanced undergraduate students. The course focuses especially on intersections with the Babylonian Talmud and other Jewish traditions, but we also consider the relevance of non-Jewish Mesopotamian sources (e.g. Mandaeans, Syriac Christian, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, ancient Assyrian/Babylonian) and compare contemporaneous and diachronically stratified traditions throughout the Mediterranean, Near East, and Iranian Plateau. We consider the utility and drawbacks of different methodological approaches and explore relevant theoretical and pragmatic issues, including matters of textual transmission, orality and materiality, ritual practice, cosmology, communal identity and authority, gender and sexuality, and the interplay of religion, science, magic, medicine, and other aspects of culture in Late Antiquity. Prerequisite: Previous experience with Hebrew or Aramaic.  

* RLST 422b / EGYP 147b, Egyptian Monastic Literature in Coptic  Stephen Davis
Readings in the early Egyptian classics of Christian asceticism in Sahidic Coptic, including the desert Fathers and Shenute. Prerequisite: EGYP 127 or equivalent. Counts as L4 if taken after EGYP 137 or equivalent.  

* RLST 423a / EGYP 137a, Gnostic Texts in Coptic  Daniel Bohac
Reading, translation, and analysis of Gnostic and Valentinian literature from Nag Hammadi, in several dialects of Coptic. Prerequisite: EGYP 127 or equivalent. Counts as L4 if taken after EGYP 147 or equivalent.  

* RLST 488a and RLST 489b, 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 490b, 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.