RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Director of undergraduate studies: Travis Zadeh, (travis.zadeh@yale.edu) 451 College St., Rm. 308, 432-6532; religiousstudies.yale.edu

The Religious Studies curriculum approaches the history of human thought and practice while focusing on specific geographical, cultural, and philosophical areas of scholarly interest. Courses explore when, how, and why communities forge systems of value. Faculty guide students to examine institutions, practices, texts, and ideas simultaneously: to see how texts influence institutions, how institutions prescribe habits, and how human beings resist and reevaluate the given institutions and practices of their specific geographic and historical contexts. The Religious Studies department is particularly known for its promotion of scholarly research by undergraduates. Undergraduate majors acquire the linguistic, philosophical, and historical acumen necessary for an in-depth research project during their senior year.

COURSE NUMBERING

Religious Studies course offerings, other than first-year seminars, are arranged in four categories. Group A features general and comparative courses that engage more than one tradition, concept, or text. Group B includes survey courses that provide a broad introduction to a particular religious tradition or scripture in historical context. Group C includes courses on specialized topics in religious studies, both introductory and intermediate. Group D offers advanced courses on specialized topics which typically have specific prerequisites or require the permission of the instructor. Students who want a broad introduction to the study of religions can choose courses listed under Groups A or B, though courses listed under Group C are also open without prerequisite. Religious Studies majors develop specialized concentrations as they plan a major program in consultation with the director of undergraduate studies (DUS) and other members of the faculty.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MAJOR

The department offers two programs for students majoring in Religious Studies: the standard major and a major in which religious studies is combined with another subject closely related to the senior essay. Both programs require a core of six courses, a seminar, and a two-term senior essay.

Core requirement A core of six courses in Religious Studies is required of all majors and should be selected in consultation with the DUS. Students select one core course from Group A that involves the comparative study of religions and three core courses from Groups B and C that concentrate on the historical or textual study of three different religious traditions or regions. Students are encouraged to select religions and regions as widely divergent as possible in order to balance in-depth study with global diversity and connection. One core course must focus on systematic thought (ethics, philosophy, or theology). The final core course is RLST 490, Religion and Society, the junior seminar on the academic study of religion; this course is required for all majors.

Seminar requirement Before the end of the junior year, students must complete a seminar (in addition to the junior seminar) that requires a major research paper. In Program I, this seminar must be an elective in Religious Studies. In Program II, it may be a course in Religious Studies, or it may constitute one of the four term courses outside the department.

Program I. The standard major Program I consists of twelve term courses in Religious Studies, including the core of six required courses, the two-term senior essay, and four electives. The electives are usually selected from Groups C and D and form a coherent unit to help the student prepare for the senior essay. Certain cognate courses in other departments that are integral to the student’s area of concentration may count toward the major with permission of the DUS. Normally the maximum number of cognate courses that may be applied is two. Two terms of an ancient language related to the study of religion may, with permission of the DUS, be counted.

Program II. Religious studies with another subject Program II consists of eight term courses in Religious Studies (the core of six required courses and the two-term senior essay) and four term courses outside the department, one of which may fulfill the seminar requirement outlined above. The four courses outside the department need not directly concern religion, but they must form a coherent, focused unit of concentration. Through them students can develop expertise in a methodological approach, cultural area, historical period, or body of literature contributing to the senior essay. Examples of successful combinations might be: four courses in Chinese history, language, and literature with a senior essay topic on Chinese Buddhism; four courses in early American history and literature with a topic on colonial American religion; four courses in a specific area of biology and medical science with a topic on biomedical ethics; or four courses in globalization and international relations with a topic on religion and globalization. Each student’s petition to take this program will be judged on its contribution to the student’s senior essay. Normally, introductory courses in other departments may not count among the outside courses; appropriate language courses at a higher level may. Students electing Program II must, at the end of the junior year and in no case later than the beginning of the senior year, obtain approval for their proposed program from the DUS. Students who think they may elect this program should consult the DUS as early as possible in their studies to begin suitable selection of courses.

SENIOR REQUIREMENT

Students in both programs must write a senior essay under the supervision of a faculty adviser in the student’s area of concentration. In selecting a senior essay topic, students normally choose a subject on which they have completed course work before commencing the senior year. The essay counts as two term courses toward the major and is taken in both terms of the senior year. The student should begin choosing a senior essay topic during the second term of the junior year, and early in the first term of the senior year must submit a Statement of Intention approved by a faculty adviser and the DUS. The senior essay course, RLST 491 and 492, includes research and
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writing assignments as well as colloquia in which seniors present and discuss their research. The student must submit at least ten pages of the essay to the DUS by the last day of classes in the first term in order to receive a grade of "satisfactory" for that term.

ADVISING

Students majoring in Religious Studies who plan to do graduate work in the subject are strongly encouraged to study the languages that they will need for their graduate programs.

Courses in the Divinity School Some Divinity School courses may count toward the major, with permission of the DUS. Divinity School faculty are eligible to advise senior essays. Information about courses and faculty may be found in the Divinity School online bulletin.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MAJOR

Prerequisites None
Number of courses 12 term courses (incl senior req)
Specific course required RLST 490 (one of the core courses)
Distribution of courses Both programs — 5 remaining core courses to include: 1 course in comparative religions; 3 courses in historical or textual study of religious traditions, as specified; 1 course in systematic thought, as specified; Program I — 4 electives, one of which is a seminar, as specified; Program II — 4 non-introductory courses in another subject linked with the senior essay, one of which is a seminar, approved by DUS
Substitution permitted Both programs — Divinity School courses, with DUS permission; Program I — 2 related courses in other depts, with DUS permission
Senior requirement Senior essay (RLST 491, 492)

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Most courses have no prerequisites and are open to nonmajors. Courses appropriate for first-year students include:

- RLST 017, Authenticity
- RLST 022, Religion and Science Fiction
- RLST 100, Introduction to World Religions
- RLST 102, Atheism and Buddhism
- RLST 115, How to Build an American Religion
- RLST 117, What Didn’t Make It into the Bible
- RLST 121, Religion and Culture in Korea
- RLST 160, The Catholic Intellectual Tradition
- RLST 180, Mughal India, 1500–1800

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Senior Lecturers John Grim, Margaret Olin, Mary Evelyn Tucker

Lecturers Jimmy Daccache, Stephen Latham

View Courses