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**  Kyama Mugambi
This course examines the nature of “World Christianity” as an entity and an academic discipline. “World Christianity” signifies the re-thinking 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 926a, W.E.B. Du Bois and Black Radical Traditions  Clifton Granby
This course examines W.E.B. Du Bois’s contributions to the study of religious, ethical, and political thought, especially on matters related to the enduring significance of chattel slavery and its afterlives, racialized capitalism and political economy, and black internationalist criticisms of American empire. The course also considers insurgent black activists and intellectuals whose contributions developed alongside and/or in response to Du Bois’s legacy. Among those thinkers are C.L.R. James, Claudia Jones, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cedric Robinson, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Imani Perry. The hope is to gain a richer appreciation of the expansiveness of black radical traditions in a way that deepens, expands, and resituates increasingly popular criticisms of race, patriarchy, economic inequality, and empire. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 942b, Islam at the Intersections: Readings in Liberation, Race, Gender, and Sexuality  Abdul-Rehman Malik
How does the Islamic tradition address race, gender, sexuality, and power? In what ways does that tradition see itself as a means for spiritual, social, political, and economic liberation, seeking the establishment of just, merciful, and compassionate societies? How do contemporary Muslim theologians, thinkers, scholars, and jurists interrogate and engage the classical tradition at these “intersections”? How are Muslims asserting their faith through the expression of these often overlapping identities? These are the key lines of inquiry this course pursues. It is designed as a survey course—comprehensive, not exhaustive. We engage with Islam as a living tradition, a vibrant faith that is constantly and dynamically being developed, challenged, practiced, and lived. The course also provides thoughtful insights into current theological debates and discussions and seeks to center the work of those who are often marginalized by “dominant” discourses and theological formulations. Although the course has no prerequisites, students would benefit from prior introductory coursework in Islamic theology and/or tradition. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 973b, An Introduction to African Diaspora Religions  Staff
This course is an introduction to the field of African diaspora religions (ADR) through a survey of select ethnographic, archival, literary, and cinematographic materials from the late nineteenth century to the present. While organized in chronological order, the course pairs older materials with more recent ones to explore how the field of ADR has formed in response to various disciplinary forces animated by the politics of religion, race, gender, and sexuality in colonial, postcolonial, and post-emancipation contexts. Therefore, the aim of this course is not only to introduce students to the field of ADR but also to cultivate critical reading and writing skills with which to analyze the politics of race, gender, and sexuality in the study of religion. The questions that guide course lectures and discussions are: What frameworks have been used to construct the study of African diaspora religions? What are the racial, gendered, and sexual politics of these frameworks? How have these frameworks transformed over time, and what may be the significance of those transformations for study today? Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 983b, China Mission  Chloe Starr
The Day Missions Collection at YDS is one of the strongest mission collections 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, we 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 their chosen media. Area V. 3 Course cr

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

REL 909b, Rationality and Christian Belief  John Pittard
An in-depth introduction to some important controversies in religious epistemology. A central question of focus is whether the most plausible theory of epistemic justification is able to accommodate the claim that Christian belief is (often) justified. Attention is given to Swinburne’s evidentialist theory, Plantinga’s contention that key Christian convictions are “properly basic,” Alston’s perceptual model of religious belief, and various alternative proposals. Area V. 3 Course cr

REL 922a, 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 995b, The End of the World  John Pittard and Matthew Croasmun
A philosophical investigation of present-day apocalyptic fears, utopian dreams, and possible ways that the world (as we know it) might end. Topics examined include the potential implications of artificial superintelligence, the assumptions dividing climate alarmists and their critics, the promises and perils of life in virtual worlds, competing views on whether we should seek to avert humanity’s extinction or welcome it, and contrasts between secular and religious ways of relating to the end. Engagement with these topics provides the occasion to engage with questions of enduring philosophical and existential importance: what is most valuable, how should we live, and for what should we hope? Area V. 3 Course cr

RELIGION AND THE ARTS

REL 900a, Sacred Sounds: Key Issues in the Ethnomusicology of Religion  Bo kyoung Im
How and why do religious practitioners around the world engage in the sonic dimensions of lived experience? What local, regional, and global histories impinge upon meanings that obtain in sacred music practices? This course examines the intersections between modern sonic and religious practice. First, we consider why, indeed, the whole world doesn’t love chamber music and interrogate the ways in which various ontological and epistemic claims are forwarded in the planning, experience, and interpretation of sonic-religious practice. Thereafter, by addressing case studies that span both northern and southern hemispheres, the course engages key themes in the ethnomusicological and anthropological study of music and religion. Through topics such as music and postcolonialism, modernity, gender and sexuality, history, ritual, postsecularism, communication and technology, labor, and diaspora, discussions center the role of power in shaping the conditions under which truth is experienced on two
interconnected levels: in “the field,” where events themselves happen and “at home,” where events are interpreted and rendered into academic prose. Throughout the term, our learning community carves out intellectual space to consider the faith claims to which ethnomusicological interlocutors bear witness. Area V.

REL 903b, Epic Laments: Sorrow in Ancient and Contemporary Caribbean Literatures  
Staff
This course focuses on expressions of sorrow in contemporary Caribbean literature alongside the ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean literature from which it critically draws in content, forms, or themes. With weekly pairings of ancient and contemporary Caribbean texts, the course studies expressions of sorrow therein in their aesthetic and historical specificity. The first and third units of the course pair portions of ancient Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman epic poetry with contemporary Caribbean poetry and novels. Special attention is given to how expressions of sorrow are shaped by epic poetry’s features, such as heroic deeds, divine interventions, descents into the world of the dead, and prophetic visions. The second, middle unit of the course pairs biblical wisdom literature and Greek tragedy with Caribbean plays and memoirs to consider how expressions of sorrow are formed by the philosophical inquiries they dramatize. In short, this course asks how expressions of sorrow relate to broader themes that are as relevant today as always—empire, mortality, and political violence; gender and family relations; and remembrance of the dead and the divine. Area V.

REL 906a, Modern Short Fiction  
Christian Wiman
This course focuses on the theological implications of short fiction written between 1937 and 2023. The literature of the twentieth century (and the first quarter of the twenty-first century) is typically thought of as anti-religious. This course examines whether that assumption is true by analyzing the work of prominent writers of that time. We also consider exactly what kinds of theological/religious thinking and feeling fiction enables. This course has no specific prerequisites, but some familiarity with the study of literature would be helpful. Area V.

REL 920b, Continuing Bonds with the Dead through Art  
David Mahan and Tanya Walker
From the "lynching memorial" to memorial tattoos, art seeks to remember the dead. But does it do more? Does art enable the living to maintain an ongoing relationship with those who have died, and if so, how? What happens when we “encounter” the dead in and through a work of art? Does the work function differently for those who knew them personally versus those who are “meeting” them for the first time? How do such works complicate our understanding of the dead’s absence or presence? Through an examination of primarily contemporary works of art, this course explores these questions through the lens of the “continuing bonds” model of bereavement, using methods of “slow looking” to carefully observe both artistic form and function. We traverse a wide array of visual, literary, liturgical, performative, and digital artistic practices in order to explore both the potential and limitations of art to maintain connections with the dead. As we proceed, our exploration considers the 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 do. Area V.
REL 933a, 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 953a, Critical Methods in Reading Poetry Theologically  David Mahan
This course explores poetry and the study of poetry as forms of theological discourse. Through the use of a variety of critical methods and 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, including works by Asian American and African American writers, this class examines how modern and late-modern poets have created fresh embodiments of faith perspectives and contributed to both the expressive and reflective tasks of theology. This course has no specific prerequisites, but a background in literary studies would be helpful. Area V.  3 Course cr

REL 955a, 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 990b, Taking Leave: Meditations on Art, Death, and the Afterlife from the Bible to the Twentieth Century  Bruce Gordon
This seminar seeks to contextualize leave-taking within the explicitly religious and artistic contexts of Western culture. We open with readings from ancient texts from Mesopotamian, Greek, Latin and Judaic cultures, and end with the U.S. Civil War. And in between we spend considerable time on the ways in which the advent of Christianity and, in turn, the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and modern worlds influenced the practices and understanding of leave-taking. En route we explore how, for example, Catholicism sought to extend life into the third realm of Purgatory, why the Reformation sought to undo those imaginative excursions, and the extent
to which the different faiths of figures such as Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and John Donne produced radically different kinds of finished—and unfinished—works. As we explore the transformative potential of the goodbye in literary and religious works, we also engage with more recent discussions from theologians, theorists, and therapists about grieving, transitions, and letting go. Our objectives are: to strive to understand the important role that leave-takings play in the history of Christianity and artistic expression, especially between 1300–1850; to probe the difference between religious faiths of early modernity with respect to rituals of saying goodbye and the afterlife; to sharpen our skills as readers, spectators, and listeners of works that engage with complex questions regarding the meaning of one's life and one's lifework; and to contextualize our readings within contemporary conversations about dying, grief, and letting go. Area V and Area III.  

**REL 992b, Art and Ritual at Mount Sinai—Travel Seminar**  Vasileios Marinis and Robert Nelson  
This course looks at art and ecclesiastical and pilgrimage rituals at the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai. Founded by Emperor Justinian on a site already venerated by Christians as the place where, supposedly, Moses encountered the Burning Bush, the monastery is one of the oldest continuously inhabited Christian communities in the world. Its holdings of icons have no parallel and offer the opportunity to study Christian imagery in the context of both devotional use and corporate rituals, if not place of origin. This course introduces various aspects of Orthodox liturgy and religious pilgrimage relevant to the explication of the surviving church arts at the monastery and the surrounding area. Area V.  

**STUDY OF SOCIETY**

**REL 927a, Religious Language**  Peter Grund  
What is religious language, and what makes certain ways of using language “religious”? What functions does religious language have for different communities of speakers and writers in different contexts and situations? How is religious language appropriated, exploited, and manipulated for political, commercial, and ideological reasons? How can we use frameworks from linguistics and language study to understand and further appreciate the nature, functions, and power of religious language in our own lives and in society in general? These are some of the questions that we explore in this course. Focusing on Christian traditions and the English language, we look at aspects of word choice, metaphor, and other language strategies of religious language, and we use online tools, text collections, and search software to see what makes religious language tick. We draw on genre analysis to see how prayers and sermons as well as eulogies and other genres are put together linguistically (both now and historically) and discuss how knowledge of “genre language” can inform our understanding of the parameters of certain genres as well as their creative flexibility. As we look at the details of language and language strategies, we also consider what role religious language plays in creating and maintaining communities (drawing especially on the concept of “communities of practice”) and how the community function of religious language is exploited by individuals as well as groups for commercial and political reasons. The smaller assignments in the class allow students to explore aspects of religious language that are important to them, and the final project, which can take a number of different shapes, can be adapted to students’ particular commitments, whether religious/congregational, non-profit, educational, creative, linguistic, or other. No
prior coursework or knowledge of language studies is required or necessary. Area V.

3 Course cr

**REL 936a, Religion and Race in the United States** Todne Thomas

Religion, race, and ethnicity mediate contested social memberships. Religious imaginaries often possess power through their association with eternal and transcendent truths. Racial and ethnic identities have existed as powerful social taxonomies because they are believed to be fixed, innate, and biologically determined. Thus, religious and racial phenomena are popularly imagined as somehow existing beyond the realm of the social. When set in the context of the United States—a society that is self-referentially multicultural but that is informed by hegemonic white Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural norms—the critical, deconstructive study of religion and race emerges as a complex and significant intellectual project. This class examines how religion and race intersect in the United States from the eighteenth century until the present. Through our analysis of religious studies texts that straddle a number of disciplines, we explore how religion and race mutually inform shared understandings of socio-political belonging, hierarchy and boundaries, recuperative institutional projects, and structural and personal identities. In this rendition of the course we examine the intersections of religion, race, and settler colonialism; the operation of minoritized religious movements in contexts of detention and government surveillance; and scenes of interracial religious solidarities and conflicts. In this course students acquire working conceptual definitions of religion and race/ethnicity, develop an understanding of how religion and race mediate interlocking modes of structural oppression and collective identities through comparative analysis, and apply theories of religion and race/ethnicity to case studies to demonstrate comprehension and distill independent thinking. Area V and Area III.

3 Course cr

**REL 970a, Theory in Mourning: Readings in Race, Religion, Gender, and Sexuality** Staff

“I came to theory because I was hurting.” This is how the late bell hooks begins her 1991 essay, “Theory as Liberatory Practice.” Taking that opening line as its thematic cue, this course approaches key texts in Black feminist, queer, and trans theory with a mournful orientation. The course begins with three essays — mourning essays by Freud (1917), Klein (1940), and Fanon (1952) — to which subsequent texts respond in a variety of ways. The course then moves through key texts from the late 1980s to the present. The aim of this course is to familiarize students with key texts in Black feminist, queer, and trans theory, while cultivating appreciation for how texts considered theory are as much singular sites of experience as they are enabling of critical abstraction. The course asks not only how mourning and theorizing (in)form each other, but also how mourning theory orients studies of race, religion, gender, and sexuality and vice versa. Lingering with these questions is crucial for academic and ministerial study committed to critically addressing challenges in today’s world with care. Area V.

3 Course cr

**REL 988b, Virtue, Vice, and Epistemic Injustice** Clifton Granby

This seminar examines recent debates in the ethics and epistemology of testimony, giving special attention to the influence of social identity, the politics of power, and ongoing evasions of (in)justice. Prominent themes include the relationship between epistemic authority, credibility judgments, and speaker trustworthiness; epistemologies of ignorance (especially those involving race, gender, sex, and class); the promises and perils of virtue-based political praxis; the fostering of subversive practices of resistance;
Area V: Comparative and Cultural Studies

and the challenges that attend individual and communal transformation. We begin by examining accounts of interpersonal trust and social authority. Next, our focus shifts to how these relations become fraught under non-ideal conditions—institutional, individual, and otherwise. The second half of the course scrutinizes recent attempts to identify, resist, and transform unjust relations of power and inequality. We conclude by testing the serviceability of those proposals in specific contexts involving, but not limited to: narratives concerning space and place; racialized and gendered forms of punishment; charismatic authority; poverty and homelessness; and modes of address (and refusal) that involve silence, quiet, and retreat. Area V and Area II.

REL 994a, Moral Issues in Public Policy: Poverty, Ecological Devastation, and Voting Rights
William Barber

This seminar introduces students to contemporary public policy debates about poverty, ecological devastation, and voting rights by examining the moral issues at stake in each debate from a theological and constitutional perspective. With the best data and evidence-based research available, students are challenged to ask not only what is possible, but also what justice, love, and mercy demand of society and how this moral mandate can be leveraged to effect positive policy change. We are joined by guests from the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy’s Fellows Program who are both experts in their fields and directly-impacted activists working for policy change on the issues we discuss. Area V.

REL 999b, Religion and Neoliberalism
Todne Thomas

Neoliberalism is studied by scholars as a political economic ideology that enlists states to engage in the deregulation of capitalist enterprises, the retraction of social welfare initiatives, and the privatization of government functions. As a social logic, neoliberalism is associated with the extension of market rationalities into non-economic spheres of social life. Consequently, neoliberalism is associated with reconfigurations of government, changed social landscapes, and emerging markets and market ideologies. Yet, how have the changes instituted by neoliberalism given shape to conceptualizations and institutionalizations of the “religious,” “spiritual,” and the “ethical/moral”? What alignments and conflicts has it generated between reckonings of “public” and “private” spheres, the sacred and the secular? And, what constellations of knowledge/power, hierarchy, and counter-discourse are produced by entanglements of religion and neoliberalism? This seminar on religion and neoliberalism seeks to answer such questions by: reviewing historical and conceptual materials about neoliberalism, in particular its socio-cultural formations; examining social scientific and humanities texts that present case studies of the religious, spiritual, ethical, and moral manifestations of neoliberalism; distilling theory and studies of neoliberalism to discuss its relevance as an explanatory framework for Covid-19 governmental response and/or to generate speculative ideas about modes of reform, resistance, and alternative political economic rationalities. Area V.

3 Course cr