

Department of Religious Studies

The Department of Religious Studies offers Honours, Majors and Minors with a critical approach to studying religious traditions in their multiple contexts--historical, cultural, political, artistic or literary, for example, both local and global. Given the range and depth of these contexts, this critical study requires approaches that are at the same time interdisciplinary and focused on the diversity of religions. The Department offers courses at the introductory (1000), intermediate and advanced (2000-3000) as well as seminar (4000) levels which are either tradition-specific or multi-religious in scope.

Minor in Religious Studies

Students who select a Minor in Religious Studies must complete 18 credit hours of courses, including:

RELG 1006 Introduction to Religious Studies

and one of the following from the Tools Courses:

RELG 2243 Texts and Contexts

RELG 2313 Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

RELG 2333 Introduction to the New Testament

RELG 2353 Introduction to the Qur'an

RELG 2413 Ritual Studies

Major in Religious Studies

Students who select a Major in Religious Studies must complete 36 credit hours of courses, including:

RELG 1006 Introduction to Religious Studies

and one of the following from the Tools Courses:

RELG 2243 Texts and Contexts

RELG 2313 Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

RELG 2333 Introduction to the New Testament

RELG 2353 Introduction to the Qur'an

as well as:

RELG 2413 Ritual Studies

RELG 4023 Scope and Methods

Students contemplating a Major in Religious Studies will select their courses in consultation with a member of the Department. Students must declare their Major to the Registrar's Office and the Department Chair by the beginning of their third year.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of Religious Studies, students selecting the Major program are encouraged to consider the intellectual and practical value of obtaining a second major in another discipline.

Honours in Religious Studies

An Honours degree in Religious Studies requires a minimum of 54 credit hours in Religious Studies courses, at least 12 credit hours of which must be at the 4000-level, including:

RELG 1006 Introduction to Religious Studies

and one of the following from the Tools Courses:

RELG 2243 Texts and Contexts

RELG 2313 Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

RELG 2333 Introduction to the New Testament

RELG 2353 Introduction to the Qur'an

as well as

RELG 2413 Ritual Studies

as well as one of the following Research Methodology Courses:

RELG 2003 Exploring History (HIST)

RELG 2013 Research Design (SOCl)

RELG 3053 Qualitative Research Methods (GERO, HMRT, SOCl)

as well as one of the following from the Multidisciplinary Courses:

RELG 2223 Psychology of Religion (PSYC)

RELG 2543 Sociology of Religion (SOCl)

RELG 3423 Reason and Religion (PHIL)

RELG 3643 Anthropology of Religion (ANTH)

In addition, the Honours degree requires

RELG 4023 Scope and Methods

and

RELG 4033 Honours Thesis Proposal Seminar

and

RELG 4066 Honours Thesis

Before the end of their second year, students will want to consult with a member of the Religious Studies Department in planning their Honours program. Students must declare their Honours subject to the Registrar's Office and the Department Chair by the beginning of their third year.

To qualify for the Honours program, students must have a minimum grade point average of 3.3 (B+) in their first two years of study. To earn an Honours degree, students must obtain a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.00 (B) in all Religious Studies courses and equivalents taken in the Honours subject.

RELG 4023 Scope and Methods and RELG 4033 Honours Thesis Proposal Seminar must be taken in the third year of the Honours program of study as prerequisites for RELG 4066 Honours Thesis.

Given the interdisciplinarity of Religious Studies research, it is recommended that Honours students serious about maintaining the full range of options open for graduate studies take a second major in another discipline of their choice.

Introductory Course

RELG-1006. Introduction to Religious Studies

A thematic, issues-oriented introduction to the study of religions. While each section of the course is different because it is taught by a different professor, the issues and themes are common to all. Some of the themes and issues encountered are prejudice, sexuality, death and after death, the long search, evil and suffering, music and religion. The data to illustrate these themes and issues are drawn from the religious traditions of the world. Fundamental to the course methodology is the identification of focal questions. The intention of the course is to foster in students an active appreciation of the religious dimension of life and to share with them the tools to think critically about it.

Intermediate and Advanced Courses

1. Multi-Religious Courses

Intermediate and Advanced Courses at the 2000-3000 level are organized into Multi-Religious courses which are more comparative in scope, and Tradition-Specific courses which are focused on an individual or regional tradition and its internal diversities. These courses serve the purpose of both the general and deepening interests of students. RELG 1006 Introduction to Religious Studies is not a prerequisite to these courses. Students with a general interest in religions are invited to enroll in any courses offered at the 2000-3000 level.

RELG-2133. Religion and Ecology (ENVS)

Many religious traditions display a variety of stances towards the environmental crisis, ranging from indifference to reform. Through critical and comparative study, this course explores religious approaches to ecology in a variety of traditions. Topics may include environmental stewardship, deep ecology, ecoliberation, ecofeminism and ethnic indigenous ecology.

RELG-2163. Contemporary Perspectives on Science and Religion

This course examines the recent debates over the relation between science and religion. The last five years of the 20th Century have seen a resurgence of interest in this relation. This has been sparked by developments in the sciences, particularly in physics and genetics, as well as by a newly-emerging understanding of what science is. The central questions include whether science and religion are compatible and whether recent developments in the sciences give new answers to religious and theological questions. Readings will represent all sides of these debates.

RELG-2173. Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding

Throughout the world, most religious traditions are involved both in legitimating violence and in building peace. This course critically and comparatively explores the roles of religious leaders, symbols, discourses and actions in conflict-prone settings. Topics may be related to identity-based conflict, genocide, post-conflict reform and reconciliation.

RELG-2183. Religion and Politics

Religious traditions and actors mobilize and in turn are mobilized by political movements at international, national, and community-based levels. Within a multi religious and comparative framework, this course explores the way in which religious and political identities, actors and systems interact on issues related, for instance, to religiously-based political parties, democratization movements, nationalism, fundamentalism and the politics of resistance.

RELG-2193. New Religious Movements: Cults in the New Age

New religious movements often challenge the values and vision of mainstream religious traditions. This course is a collaborative inquiry into the historical and cultural contexts, self-understanding and practices of such new religious movements as the Church of Scientology, the Branch Davidians, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Euro-Indians, and the Vineyard Renewal.

RELG-2233. Women and Religion

The course aims to study how i) women in history and in modern times respond to socio-cultural restrictions and their attempts to create spiritual and social alternatives, ii) how notions of asceticism and sexuality are utilized as liberating and prescriptive modes. It will examine feminist critiques to classical, medieval, and current texts and thinkers. We will closely look at the assumptions that guide both classical texts and modern critiques.

RELG-2273. Death and Dying

This course explores a wide range of topics in the area of death and dying. As a fundamental issue for human beings, these phenomena require investigation from a variety of perspectives. The course considers aspects of death and dying that are religious, philosophical, psychological, and sociological in nature. Further, the course is concerned with both practical and theoretical issues that arise from the relationship between aging, and death and dying.

RELG-2283. Religion and Art

Focusing primarily on the Western religious traditions, this course will examine the art and architecture of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in historical context. Themes to be studied may include: the image of the Divine, iconoclasm, shrines and pilgrimages, patronage, the appropriation of sacred space, sacred music, performance art, and food.

RELG-2293. Religion and Sexuality

An examination of the understanding of the nature of human sexuality with specific reference to religious and theological frameworks. Issues studied may include sexuality as foundational in personal dignity and integrity, marriage, relationality, communication, the commodification of sexuality, systematic abuses and neglect of sexuality.

RELG-2683. Special Topics

The content of this course will reflect the strengths of the faculty and the particular needs of students. It will identify and explore a general interest topic that is multi-religious or tradition-specific in scope.

RELG-3513. Bioethics

This course explores the basic approaches and issues related to the field of bioethics. A specific emphasis on contemporary medical practice will provide the context for ethical reflection.

RELG-3573. Religion and Social Ethics

The study of the relationships which shape the nature of human interaction informed by or oriented towards values and specific goals. The role of religious beliefs and communities in analyzing and responding to economic, social, and political problems will be examined.

RELG-3583. Media and Ethics

A critical and foundational examination of the role and function of media in Western society, focussing on its formative influence on religion and culture. Issues may include the business of news, entertainment, the nature of advertising, and religion and media. This course requires students to have a background in ethics and/or critical theory.

RELG-3953. Portrayals of Jihad and Crusade: History, Memory and Film (HIST)

This course considers the diverse ways in which modern global audiences have come to understand histories of religious violence. Our focus will be on academic and popular interpretations of so-called jihad or crusade conflicts from the Middle Ages to the present. Print, electronic and film sources will be examined, reflecting a wide range of often conflicting viewpoints as they have evolved over time.

RELG-3593. Moral Development

An examination of the processes and elements through which persons develop a critical perspective and appreciation of the role of value in their lives and in the social order. This course requires students to have completed previous work in ethics.

RELG-4163. Independent Study

A course of independent study under the supervision of the Religious Studies Department. Students will normally collaborate on a description of the study project with the staff member or members who will guide the independent study. This description must be approved by the Department Chair and submitted to the registrar for his records.

RELG-4183. Special Topics

The content of this course changes from year to year reflecting the strengths of the faculty and the particular needs of students. It will involve an advanced treatment of some aspect of the religious dimension of human experience that is multi-religious or tradition-specific in scope.

2. Tradition-Specific Courses

RELG-2253. Islam in an Age of Globalization

In their responses to modernity, Muslims have variously chosen: a return to traditionalism; a reinterpretation of Islam; secular responses separating religion and state; or some combination of the above. This course examines these responses to modernity in their cultural contexts. Themes will include: issues of gender; notions of democracy in Islam; Muslims living in the West; the rise of fundamentalisms; the globalization of Sufi orders.

RELG-2433. Christianity and Ecology

The many diverse traditions within Christianity display a wide and conflicting range of positions related to ecological issues and the environmental crisis. Through critical and comparative study, this course will explore the response of diverse Christian traditions to ecological issues such as climate change, water security, biodiversity, deforestation and environmental activism. The range of responses display, among others, themes of environmental stewardship, deep ecology, ecojustice, ecofeminism and indifferentism.

RELG-2513. Foundations of Christian Ethics

An examination of the theoretical base and the significance of Christian ethics with an analysis of some of its central aspects such as the foundational role of love, critical thought and engagement, conscience and responsibility, and understanding contemporary dilemmas.

RELG-2553. History of the Islamic World to the Ottoman Empire (HIST)

This course provides a basic introduction to Islamic societies in their formative centuries. We will explore how the Muslim umma first emerged, developed and ultimately established itself as a unifying yet far from monolithic ideal, linking different peoples across the globe. Our focus will be on comprehension of historical experiences and relations between peoples rather than on detailed analysis of religious beliefs.

RELG-2613. Basic Issues in Theology

An introduction to the basic precepts, methods, and resources of theology. An examination of challenges to theology will provide an understanding of the present state of theological concerns.

RELG-3073. Islam I

This course will introduce students to the basic beliefs and practices of global Islam, beginning with the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. The course will include overviews of Islamic history, knowledge, and spirituality. Special attention will be paid to the study of Islam in its cultural contexts: Middle Eastern, African, Asian, European, and North American, among others.

RELG-3223. The Medieval Church (HIST)

This course deals with the history of the Church from the time of Gregory the Great in the sixth century to the end of the fifteenth century. For the most part, we will deal with the Western Church, although there will be some treatment of the relations that existed with the East. The theme that will run throughout the course is that of the interaction between the Church and the society of this period.

RELG-3323. Book of Isaiah

This course will study the book of Isaiah as an example of prophetic literature. It will treat such questions as the authorship, dating, unity, background, and theology of the book. Particular passages will be singled out for more detailed study.

RELG-3343. Gospel of John

This course will study the gospel of John as one of the four canonical gospels. It will treat such questions as authorship, dating, background, sources, and theology of the gospel. Particular passages will be singled out for more detailed study.

RELG-3413. God in Western Thought (PHIL)

A survey, through lectures, readings, and discussion, of Western philosophical speculation regarding the divine. Themes: theism and atheism in classical antiquity; demonstrations of God's existence in medieval philosophy; the effect on religious belief of empiricism, idealism, Marxism, and existentialism. Prerequisite: PHIL 1013 and 1023, or permission of the instructor.

RELG-3433. Religions of Tibet, China and Japan

We shall investigate what scholars are saying about the religious traditions of China and Japan: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, and the popular religions.

RELG-3453. Religious Traditions of India I

An inquiry into the religious traditions of India, including Hinduism in its many varieties, early Buddhism, and Jainism.

RELG-3473. Native American Religions

An inquiry into the issues in the study of Native American religions, and the results of that study. The focus will be on some of the diverse religions of First Nations people in what is now Canada and the United States.

RELG-3533. Islam in the West (Art and Architecture in New York City)

This course examines the physical presence of Islam in New York City. Students will tour the mosques of New York, visit collections of Islamic art and manuscripts, observe ritual music

and dance, and taste food from around the Muslim world. Themes will include spiritual Islamic art, Islam in the West, and North American Muslims today. The goal of the course is to provide students with material objects that will enrich their understanding of culture.

RELG-3553. Islamic Ethics and Spirituality

This course will look at the various forms of Islamic spirituality, as expressed by individuals and organized orders. It will explore the symbolic path of the mystic and how it coalesced with popular piety and sainthood. It will also look at the ethical systems of rational mystics who combined theology, philosophy, and mysticism.

RELG-3653. Women and Christianity

Women's rights, gender sensitivities, and feminist movements both inside and outside the churches have inspired lively and complex debates within contemporary Christian theologies. By deconstructing, revising and rebuilding basic issues in theology on the basis of women's experiences and gender analysis, a substantial range of feminist theologies has emerged. This course will explore theological themes and interests central to the diversity of feminist theologies.

RELG-4173. Independent Study

A course of independent study under the supervision of the Religious Studies Department. Students will normally collaborate on a description of the study project with the staff member or members who will guide the independent study. This description must be approved by the Department Chair and submitted to the registrar for his records.

Specialized Courses

The Department of Religious Studies offers special interest courses at the 2000, 3000, and 4000 level.

At the 2000 level, the purpose of the Tools courses is to build skills and resources for the critical study of religious traditions. These courses are required for a Minor, Major or Honours in Religious Studies.

At the 2000 and 3000 level, the purpose of the Research Methodology and Multidisciplinary courses is to expand the range of critical intellectual skills for the study of religious traditions. Students seeking an Honours degree in Religious Studies are required to obtain 3 credit hours from the Research Methodology courses and a further 3 credit hours from the Multidisciplinary courses. Students seeking a Major in Religious Studies are encouraged but not required to obtain 3 credit hours in either of these if not both.

At the 4000 level, the purpose of these seminars is to provide a measure of integration at the end of a Major or Honours program of study; and to provide students majoring or honouring a platform for further studies in a broad range of academic or professional programs.

1. Tools Courses

Students of religions engage in the analysis of three main sources of religious identity: action, rituals and texts. The intent of these courses is to provide critical resources for the analysis of religiously-based action, rituals and texts. Tools courses remain open to all students with a general interest in religious studies. There are no prerequisites, except the completion of the first year of university-level study or its equivalent.

RELG-2243. Texts and Contexts

This course will explore the interaction between text and context of several writings deemed to be sacred, whether traditional or not, from a variety of religious traditions. Attention will also be paid to the particular situations and conditions in which these texts are created and received.

RELG-2313. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

This course will provide an introduction to the study of the Hebrew Bible, commonly referred to by Christians as the Old Testament. A first chapter will provide an overview of the history of Israel from the early centuries of the second millennium B.C. to the end of the first century A.D. A second chapter will look at the various canonical collections of scriptural books accepted by the Samaritans, the Palestinian Jews, the Jews of the Diaspora and Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians.

RELG-2333. Introduction to the New Testament

This course will investigate the history of the growth of the New Testament Canon of twenty seven books and then study two major categories of New Testament books: the Gospels and the Pauline Corpus. Several special questions including the Synoptic Question, the relationship between John and the Synoptics and the authenticity of the Pauline Corpus will be briefly introduced.

RELG-2353. Introduction to the Qur'an

The Qur'an is understood by Muslims to be the direct word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. This 7th-century Arabic text continues to serve as a guidance for all Muslims. This course will examine the role of the Qur'an in the Islamic world: its history, methods and differences of interpretation. It will further explore the significance and impact of the written word in art and architecture.

RELG-2413. Ritual Studies

An inquiry into some of the issues in the study of rituals by means of a close investigation of selected religious rites and more secular examples of ritualizing. Examples might include Hindu pilgrimage, Christian liturgy in its many forms, Shinto festivals, rites of passage from childhood to adulthood (Bar Mitzvah in Judaism, sacred thread ceremony in Hinduism, the Isanaklesh Gotal of Apache girls), Taoist death rites, and contemporary behaviour at sporting events and music concerts.

2. Research Methodology Courses

Religious Studies involves a variety of research methodologies as the basis for gathering, organizing, analyzing and interpreting data related to religious identities and traditions. The intent of these courses is to provide Honours students with critical formation in one or another of the research methodologies active in the discipline.

RELG-2003. Exploring History: Critical Approaches to Historical Methods and Theories (HIST)

This mandatory course for History Majors and Honours students provides an introduction to the discipline of History. The course examines a variety of historiographical and methodological approaches to History, as well as the history of History. It encourages students to re-examine their assumptions about History, but it will also help students develop their basic historical research and writing skills. Exploring History provides a foundation for upper-year History courses and students are strongly encouraged to take it before their third year. Prerequisite: At least 6 credit hours in History courses at St. Thomas University.

SOCI 2013 Research Design & Method (NATI)

An introduction to the main research approaches used in sociology. The course includes practical experience in developing a research program by considering research question development, research design, methods of data collection, research ethics and data analysis. Of particular interest are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.

RELG-3053. Qualitative Research Methods (GERO) (HMRT) (SOCI)

This course is intended for third-year Honours students who are considering using qualitative analysis in the research for their Honours thesis. It will address theoretical foundations of qualitative analysis, research ethics for qualitative researchers, and provide hands-on experience in developing a research question and collecting and analyzing data using basic qualitative techniques including observation, in-depth interviewing, and unobtrusive measures.

3. Multidisciplinary Courses

Religious Studies is a multidisciplinary endeavour of research, analysis and interpretation. The intent of these courses is to provide students with an intellectual experience of the multidisciplinary interests representative of Religious Studies in order that students might become skillful in negotiating multiple disciplinary perspectives.

RELG-2223. Psychology of Religion (PSYC)

The examination of religious experience drawing from the classic approaches to psychology such as William James, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung, and their contemporary interpreters.

RELG-2543. Sociology of Religion (SOCI)

This course focuses on the relations between the beliefs and institutionalized practices that people hold sacred, and contemporary community life. The students explore the contradictory trends of mass secularism and the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the practices through which people collectively mobilize to sustain, challenge, and change religious identities. The question raised by Durkheim is explored: If religion expresses and reinforces community solidarity, how can modern societies accommodate religious diversity? A further question is: How are religions implicated in political struggles, the women's movement, nationalism, and war?

RELG 3423. Reason and Religion (PHIL)

A survey of issues and authors, both classical and contemporary, in the philosophy of religion. Consideration will be given to the following: defining religion, religious experience and faith, the problem of evil, the meaning of religious language, the question of life beyond death. Prerequisite: PHIL 1013 and 1023, or permission of the instructor.

RELG-3643. Anthropology of Religion (ANTH)

This course emphasizes an understanding of religious phenomena by viewing religion in the context of the diversity of cultures. Prerequisite: None.

4. Majors and Honours Required Seminars

RELG-4023. Scope and Methods

An in-depth analysis of selected issues in Religious Studies, focusing on the distinctive concerns of the discipline and the furthering of research skills appropriate to it. The course fosters reflection on the variety of methods used in Religious Studies, mindful of the need of senior students to integrate their four years of learning in the discipline. Honours students are normally required to take this course in their third year, Majors students in their fourth year, or full-time study.

RELG-4033. Honours Thesis Proposal Seminar

Designed for students who are considering advanced study, this course will consider a variety of research strategies in the field of Religious Studies. The final project will be an Honours thesis proposal. Normally taken in the second semester of a student's next to final year, this course is required for continuation into the Honours Program.

RELG-4066. Honours Thesis

The student will select an advisor from the Department members before the end of the second semester in his or her third year of studies. The student, in consultation with his or her advisor, will submit a thesis proposal which must be approved by the Department by the end of the student's third year of studies. The thesis is written in the fourth year of studies.

NOTE: Not all courses listed are offered each year. Please consult with the Department Chair for more information about current and planned course offerings.