

The Religious Studies Major in the Context of General Education

The academic study of world religions provides liberal arts students with an opportunity to develop their imagination and empathy for unfamiliar ways of thinking in a disciplined fashion. This empathetic understanding grasps the coherence of an alternative religious point of view within its own context: the student discovers that it makes sense, and the sense it makes can enlarge her or his own horizon of human possibility.

Thinking Critically About Religions

Students of RELS learn to pay close attention to the self-interpretations of religious communities, along with other aspects of their belief and practice, but they do not privilege these self-interpretations in their own understanding of these communities. These religious communities and collective interpretations are subjected to specific modes of investigation that have emerged in the academic context of studying world religions. The critical student must master academic methods of investigation with which to test the historical and authority claims of religious communities regarding their origins, past development, interactions with other traditions, and their contemporary expression. Students are thereby initiated into the practice of critical methods used in the secular academy and are introduced to interdisciplinary methods and theoretical techniques from anthropology, history, comparative literature, psychology, and philosophy, especially phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Religious Studies in the Context of the Liberal Arts

The student of religious studies can expect to share many goals with other liberal arts majors. A close reading of texts is a high priority. RELS students learn to attend closely to the details and nuances of primary sources in a variety of genres. Some of the texts our students study are densely reasoned treatises, some are poetic and evocative, some are artfully propagandistic. It is challenging to learn to read such different types of texts intelligently, and of course a close reading is inseparable from interpretation and criticism.

Writing skills are also mastered in RELS courses, since the writing of papers, from brief expository exercises to full essays, is required of students on a regular basis, especially in upper level and advanced courses, and their work is subjected to criticism. As students progress from entry-level to advanced courses, not only does the writing of papers become the preferred test of comprehension, but class discussion predominates as classroom method. Students learn to become articulate in formulating and defending points of view, raising critical questions, meeting the arguments of peers and instructors. Close reading, grammatical and coherent writing, verbal skills demonstrated in the give and take of discussion, mastery of terms in a foreign language: such skills are good examples of the kinds of transferable methods cultivated in liberal arts majors.

Religious Studies in the Context of the Liberal Arts (continued)

There are other transferable skills cultivated by the liberal arts major than linguistic skills. Majors in religion, for instance, learn to do documentary research on specialized topics. They learn how to design a research program, how to find sources in libraries and archives, and how to analyze and present their material coherently. They learn to use computers and other technological aids to study and research. They learn the social skills entailed in cooperative work and productive disagreement. They learn to research and interpret the past from documentary and physical evidence, and they cultivate skills of systematic observation and "thick description" in field work projects devoted to contemporary situations.

Besides such transferable skills students also pursue broad educational goals consonant with and reinforced by their liberal arts program as a whole. They master a number of critical methodologies applicable to the study of religion and to other fields in which they may be working. They gain insight into various dimensions of contemporary civilization, not only through direct study of religious aspects of the current scene, but through the perspective gained by knowledge of other times and other places. They discover the rhetorical and the experience-shaping power of symbol systems, and the social roots out of which symbol systems grow. They become aware of the extent to which the world they live in is socially constructed and they become both more and less at home in that world. The world loses something of its familiarity, but also something of its intractable givenness, and becomes susceptible to invention and discovery, to wonder and change. As it is with the world the students live in, so it is with students themselves.

With respect to all such skills and objectives, the study of religion in depth reinforces studies pursued in the other arts and sciences. It is not so rigidly departmentalized that our students feel they are in strange territory when they venture beyond the RELS curriculum into other disciplines and related areas of study. In fact, such practice is common. RELS courses commonly intersect with other disciplines and with a number of interdisciplinary minors at the college. Faculty in RELS teach regular courses linked to Honors, the Asian Studies Minor, Jewish Studies, and in Women and Gender Studies, and they offer courses cross-listed with Anthropology, Philosophy, and other disciplines.

Finally, the study of religion is intellectually stimulating and enjoyable. For many students, it is a disciplined encounter with an order of questioning that has affinities with their own struggles for personal identity. It is one way of enhancing awareness of the major themes and ideals that have motivated human beings throughout the world. It offers each student a way to reflect on the possibly limited context of their natal culture. Religious Studies training is central to a global understanding of humanity and as an academic discipline it offers a wide range of opportunities for liberal arts education.