Course Description, Goals, and Learning Objectives

This course is designed to provide a capstone experience for majors in Religious Studies. This is not just another course on the subject of religion, but a “meta-course” for advanced students that will provide an opportunity for you to reflect on the cumulative achievement of your work in RELS and consider how you might apply your knowledge and skills in your future academic, personal, and professional lives. You will engage in self-assessment, reflection, and analysis of the meaning of your experience in Religious Studies and its applicability to your life after college.

This course is designed to give you, in the company of other advanced majors, the opportunity to:
1) review and assess your own study of religions at CofC; 2) write essays that narrate your intellectual interests, analyze and integrate your previous work in the study of religions, and consider how you might continue to build on what you have learned; 3) evaluate how your RELS training has served as a bridge between other academic disciplines in your liberal education; and 4) expand your view of the usefulness of the academic study of religion for your future lives as individuals, citizens, and professionals.

Here are specific learning objectives that relate to these four course goals:

1) Students will gain a fuller understanding of
   a) what brought you to the study of religion;
   b) your distinctive interests in particular subjects and in specific theoretical and methodological approaches;
   c) the types of topics that do and don’t interest you and why
   d) how your interests compare to those of your fellow students and to representative thinkers in the contemporary study of religion;

2) Students will produce
   a) an intellectual autobiography (3-4 pages)
   b) an analytical essay (4-5 pages) on your previous work in the study of religion that identifies its distinctive topics, theoretical issues, and even gaps and evasions
   c) a professional resume or a statement of purpose that is suitable for a graduate school application

3) Students will evaluate and assess
   a) how your study of religion fits into your broader collegiate program of study, i.e.
   b) how your work in other courses and learning contexts forms a relatively coherent whole that expresses your fundamental interests in the study of religion
   c) the RELS curriculum in terms of its structure, requirements, and purported goals

4) Finally, students should be able to
   a) grasp how your study of religion might prepare you to put your learning to work in the world
   b) conceive of the benefits of the study of religion for you as individuals, citizens, professionals, and members of multiple communities

This course follows up on the Senior Seminar (RELS 450), and it is designed as a colloquium that will feature many guest speakers, including other RELS faculty members, a few recent RELS alumni, and staff members who will tell their stories, or introduce the topic of the day and guide our conversations. Because this course is the final capstone, it is an opportunity to think about the transition to graduate school, fulltime employment, or other professional opportunities that require adaptation of your learning.
Course Requirements

Attendance, Participation and Reading Assignments

This is a colloquium that promotes conversation, dialogue, and questions for our guest speakers, not a lecture course, and participants are expected to do all the required readings for each meeting. What you get out of this course will depend on how much effort you put into it. Student feedback about the usefulness the class readings and activities will be constantly sought to determine how to make it most helpful for future RELS students.

* **Regular attendance**  There will be 2 allowed absences; 3 absences will negatively affect your grade. After 4 absences, you will be **dropped** from the course. If you have a legitimate excuse please let me know and contact the Undergraduate Dean’s Office to document the reason for your absence.

* **Active participation in seminar** (20% of overall grade)
Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas during seminar discussions is a crucial part of this course. You are expected to be an active participant in class discussions. Grades for class participation will be assigned on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in class discussions, including those provoked by other students’ comments.

* **Weekly Reflection Cards and participation in class discussion** (10% of grade)  Every Monday (with day marked **RC# due**) you are to bring to class a thoughtful written reflection and/or question related to the assigned reading for that week. The reflection or question should be written on a 3x5 or 5x7 card and be based on an issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, or interesting. The questions should not simply ask for clarification, but raise significant issues or express concerns that are important to you about the topic.

Writing Requirements: Two essays and a CV/SOP

1) an intellectual autobiography that communicates what brought you to the study of religion, why it matters to you, and what values you have acquired; (**25% of overall grade**)

2) an analytical essay (1250-1500 words) that focuses on your previous writing in the collegiate study of religion, which identifies its distinctive topics, concerns, theoretical issues, and gaps and evasions (**35%**)”

Professional Development  Students will produce either:

3a) a professional resume for a personal website; OR
3b) a statement of purpose suitable for a graduate school application (**10% of grade**)

Grading:

In order to “Pass” students will need to average at least a “D-” grade (59 or higher) on their two essays, participate in the colloquium (without missing more than 4 class sessions), and participate in the final exit interview.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading Scale</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>93-100 (4.0)</th>
<th>B-</th>
<th>79-81 (2.7)</th>
<th>D+</th>
<th>66-68 (1.3)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>89-92 (3.7)</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>76-78 (2.3)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>62-65 (1.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>86-88 (3.3)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>72-75 (2.0)</td>
<td>D-</td>
<td>59-61 (.70)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>82-85 (3.0)</td>
<td>C-</td>
<td>69-71 (1.7)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>below 59</td>
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Colloquium Topics, Reading Assignments, Writing Projects, and Visiting Speakers

1/12 “Why I’m A Religious Studies Major”
During our first session, we will conduct a series of introductions. This is your first take at an “intellectual autobiography.” You will introduce yourselves to your colleagues and we will discuss specific strategies for communicating to others (including friends, family members, and random people you meet who know nothing about the academic study of religion) what “Religious Studies” means and why it matters to you.

Reading: Read “On Being a Religious Studies Major” in class (end of syllabus)

1/19 Dispelling the “Curse of Canonization” in the life of Martin Luther King
Reading: Charles Johnson, “The King We Need” and Megan Dewald, “Religion after 9/11” (note echoes of MLK’s speech “I Have a Dream”) RC#1 due by email

No class in observance of MLK Day

1/26 Scholars as Models: An Intellectual Biography of a Prominent Religionist
Reading: Nathan Schneider, “Why the World Needs Religious Studies” and Wendy Doniger, “From Great Neck to Swift Hall: Confessions of a Reluctant Historian of Religions” RC#2 due in class

2/2 The Civic Value of Religious Studies: Reflections on the “Ties that Bind”

2/9 Know Thyself: Writing an Intellectual Autobiography

Writing: Write your intellectual autobiography, due in class

Guest: Professor Louise Doire

2/16 Heal Thyself: The Cultivation of Wholeness, the Heart-Mind, or the Soul
Reading: Bobby Fong, “Cultivating ‘Sparks of Divinity’: Soul-Making as a Purpose of Higher Education” RC#4 due in class

Guest: Professor Lee Irwin

2/23 Saving the Planet: Religious Studies and Environmental Activism
Reading: Ivan Strenski, “Can Religion Professors Save the Planet?” Evan Berry, “’Saving the Planet’ Sounds Strangely Religious;” and James Miller, “Turning Students into Citizens, Religious Studies edition” from Religion Dispatches (12/2014) RC#5 due in class

Guest: Professor Todd LeVasseur (class of 1997)

3/2 Spring Break

3/9 Amberjade, An Alumna who works at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine
Reading: Reading materials TBA RC#6 due

Guest: Amberjade Mwekali-Tsering (class of 2011) lived in Dharamsala India for two years after she graduated, where she served as Secretariat for the International Tibet Network, a global coalition of NGOs, and helped produce documentary films about Tibetan refugees. She now lives in D.C. where she works at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine and she is enrolled in the MA program in International Development Studies at George Washington University.
3/16  Know Thyself Even Better: What’s persistently been on your mind? And why?
Reading:  J.Z. Smith, “When the Chips are Down”
Writing:  Review two seminar papers you’ve written about religion during your time at CofC and write a paper that analyzes your characteristic approach to the study of religion. What are your primary concerns? How do you typically approach the interpretations of religious data, and why? What kinds of topics are you drawn to, and why? What theories do you find most helpful, and why? Are there issues you acknowledge to be important, but have been avoiding? Why? Use these questions to organize your essay by outlining and even giving your essay sub-headings or section titles

3/23  Re-Thinking Religion & Science: A PhD candidate who studies religion and the brain
Reading:  Three articles by Andrew from Religion Dispatches: “Do iPads Cause Religious Experiences?” “It’s All in Your Head”; and “Does Analytic Thinking Erode Religious Belief?” RC#7 due in class
Guest:  Andrew Aghapour (class of 2007) earned a M.Phil. degree in the History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge University before he enrolled in the RELS graduate program at the University of North Carolina, where he is now writing his Ph.D dissertation. He studies the history of religion and science, he writes articles for Religion Dispatches, and he teaches improv comedy and storytelling at the Dirty South Comedy Theater in Chapel Hill.

3/30:  Helping to Heal Others: Sara Whiteley, a Social Worker who works for USAID
Reading:  Reading materials TBA RC#8 due in class
Guest:  Sara Whiteley (class of 2006) earned a Master’s degree in Social Work, with a focus on International Social Justice, from the Catholic University of America. She has worked for the State Department and now serves as an information officer for USAID in the Office of US Foreign Disaster Relief, which has taken her into the field to Nairobi Kenya, Bangkok Thailand, and Erbil, Iraq to serve in disaster affected areas.

4/6  The Religious Studies Major and Liberal Arts Education
Reading:  “The Religion Major and Liberal Education;” “The Value of a Humanities Degree: Six Students’ Views” RC#9 due in class

4/13  Looking into the future—translating RELS skills into a career
CofC Career Center representative for presentation on creating a traditional resume, novel approaches to marketing yourself for internships and job searches, using CISTERNOnline
Reading:  “AAR Survey on the Long-Term Impact of the Religious Studies Major” and “It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for Student Success”
Writing:  Crafting a resume
Guest:  Denny Ciganovic, Career Services

4/20  Taking Stock and Revise, Revise, Revise
What have you learned about yourself as a RELS student and what might you do with it or about it? How and why?
Reading:  David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” (Kenyon Commencement Address) RC#10 due
Writing:  Revise your intellectual autobiography, integrate new insights gained from your second analytic essay and incorporate any feedback received from your peers and instructor
Guest:  Professor Elijah Siegler

4/27  Exit Interviews: Assessment of the RELS program, requirements, structure of curriculum
On Being a Religious Studies Major
by Heather R. McArthur (B.A. in RELS, Vanderbilt University)

Only weeks ago as I exited the elevator and made my way into the Stadium Club for the Career Fair, I was faced with the reality of the stigma attached to my major. I bent over the welcome table and filled out my nametag: one line for my name, the other for my major. The Career Center greeter glanced at my sticker, paused, and commented that I would have to "be sure and emphasize my specific skills and abilities to the potential employers." I noticed she did not feel the need to impart the same warning to my fellow Liberal Arts majors who clustered around me. My blood boiled. This was the stigma I have feared since I signed the declaration of major card. I am a Religious Studies major . . . hear me roar.

I do not stand on the edge of campus with a cardboard box full of small, green, faux-leather New Testaments. I am not studying to be a minister. I am not even a steady churchgoer. I am a major of Religion just as others are majors of History or Biology. I am a student of culture, not a pusher of religious doctrine. I'm not here to save your soul; I'm just here to learn. What do you know about the Religious Studies Department? It is a part of the College of Arts and Sciences. The study of Religion is a subset of humanities or social sciences. The study of Theology begins with the definition of what we're trying to define, namely God. Only since 1877 and the Dutch Universities Act has comparative Religious Studies been considered a separate entity from seminaries and theological schools. The Religious Studies department is made up of a diverse group of people all working from within the context of their own particular beliefs, trying to come to an understanding of religious history, thought, and behavior. We come in peace and mean no harm. Well, that may not be entirely true. Scholars of Religious Studies poke and prod at the rituals and dogma of various religious traditions in an attempt to better understand particular behavior, often forcing people to question their own spirituality.

The Vanderbilt course catalog describes the department as "exploring the significant dimensions of religion in various traditions. These dimensions include religious experience and conviction, worship and ritual, the formation of religious groups, issues of religious leadership, the problem of belief and non-belief, and ethics and religion." Courses in the Religious Studies Department vary from Freudian theories of the religious experience to Women in the Buddhist Tradition. Students are expected to gain a cross-sectional representation of the world's religions and the leading scholarly interpretations. But most importantly, Religious Studies courses center on discussion. The students themselves are often one of the most beneficial resources available to the class. Students are encouraged to challenge each other and push the boundaries of belief, and the structure of ritualistic dogma and creed. Students examine the psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history of religion. Without examining the role of religion in a given society, how can we expect to understand the products of that society, their art, literature, and music?

Many students enter into a Religious Studies course expecting to deepen their preexisting faith in a given religious tradition; instead, they are forced to reexamine their own beliefs and preconceived ideas. However, my intent in writing this article is to emphasize the fact that the Religious Studies department is not about faith. There are no prerequisites of belief, heritage or practice to be a Religious Studies major. In fact, many students of religion, like myself, are continually assessing the various traditions and ideologies in hopes of eventually discovering a tradition that corresponds to our ever-changing world view.

So with graduation becoming more of a reality than a point on the distant horizon, I'm beginning to get a little nervous. How will a potential employer view a Religious Studies major? Will it be a disadvantage or will it spark their curiosity? The Career Fair was hardly a success. A few of my resumes will be filed away in the Human Resources Department of several banks. I watched enviously as the Economics majors scurried from one booth to the next. But Career Fairs aren't everything, and unlike peyote pilgrimages and Islamic sacrifice, economic theory will never make for interesting cocktail party conversation. Seriously though, Religious Studies has challenged me to look behind belief and continue to grapple with the existential questions of life.

This article originally appeared in the December/January 1995 issue of Versus magazine.