

**RELS 451 Capstone Colloquium (Spring 2018)**  
**Wednesday 4:00-4:50 pm @ Maybank 119**

Dr. Zeff Bjerken, Chair  
Dept. of Religious Studies  
College of Charleston

Office: 4B Glebe, Room 202  
Office hours: Mon and Wed 9:30-11:30  
E-mail: bjerken@cofc.edu (953-7156)

**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. You will also participate in co-curricular activities, ranging from guest lectures and faculty book panels to interfaith/social justice conferences.

This course is designed to give you, in the company of other advanced majors, the opportunity to review and assess your own study of religions at C of C by writing an essay that narrates your intellectual interests, analyzes and integrates your previous work in the study of religions, and consider how you might continue to build on what you have learned. Ideally, you will 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 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 (6-7 pages)
  - b) a short film promoting Religious Studies
  - c) a professional resume or CV
- 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 prepares 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 a few RELS faculty members, 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.

Since this is a colloquium that promotes conversation, dialogue, and questions for our guest speakers, not a lecture course, participants are expected to do all the required readings for each meeting. Please print out the required reading material on OAKS and always bring the relevant articles to class for discussion.

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**Course Requirements: Attendance, Participation in and out of Class and Writing Assignments**

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** You are allowed **1** unexcused absence; **2-3** absences will negatively affect your grade. After **4** unexcused 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 (15% of grade)**

Asking questions of our guest speakers, 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.

\* **A signed Contract outlining which co-curricular events you can participate in, and which you cannot and why (due in class on 1/24) plus abiding by that contract (15% of grade)**. When you attend a lecture, panel, interfaith event or conference, you are encouraged to participate and raise questions.

\* **Weekly Reflection Cards (15% of grade)** Every **Wednesday** (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. *No late RC will be accepted; any missed RC will count as a 0.*

\* **Two drafts of an intellectual autobiography**--first draft of 4-5 pages (20%), second draft of 6-7 pages (15%) that communicates what brought you to the study of religion, why it matters to you, and what values you have acquired. The first draft is due **2/14**; the revised draft is due **4/4 (35% of grade)**

\* **A peer review of a classmate's autobiography** that is one single-spaced page produced after carefully reading their first draft and meeting in pairs outside of class, due **2/21 (5% of grade)**

\* **A 2-3 minute film** on what being a RELS major at CofC means to you. Due **3/28 (10%)**

\* **A professional resume/CV (5% of grade)** that might be posted on a personal website or submitted as part of a job application, due **3/14**.

**Grading:**

In order to "Pass" students will need to average at least a "D-" grade (60 or higher), participate in the colloquium (without missing more than **3 class sessions**), and participate in the final exit interview.

<b>Grading Scale:</b>	A	93-100 (4.0)	B-	80-82 (2.7)	D+	67-69 (1.3)
	A-	90-92 (3.7)	C+	77-79 (2.3)	D	63-66 (1.0)
	B+	87-89 (3.3)	C	73-76 (2.0)	D-	60-62 (.70)
	B	83-86 (3.0)	C-	70-72 (1.7)	F	below 60

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- 1/10**            **“Why I’m A Religious Studies Major”**  
**Reading:** Read in class “On Being a Religious Studies Major” & “Talking Religion at 30,000 Feet”
- 1/17**            **Why We Need M.L. King Today and Why the World Needs Religious Studies**  
(Charles Johnson, “The King We Need”; Megan De Wald, “September Eleventh,” Nathan Schneider, “Why the World Needs Religious Studies”)    **RC#1 due in class**
- 1/18\***            **“Frontier Jews and Black Catholics: New Books in American Religions Panel”**  
Panel Discussion with Profs. Matthew Cressler and Shari Rabin, moderated by Elijah Siegler  
6 pm, Arnold Hall JWST Building, 96 Wentworth St.
- 1/24**            **A Model Scholar: An Intellectual Biography of a Prominent Religionist**  
**Reading:** (Wendy Doniger, “Confessions of a Reluctant Historian of Religions” and Doniger, “The Repression of Religious Studies”)    **RC#2 and Co-Curricular Contract due in class**
- 1/25\***            **Clifton Granby: “Resilient Injustices, Resistant Imaginations” @ 6:00 pm Alumni Hall**  
Professor Granby is an assistant professor at the Yale Divinity School, and his research focuses on African American religious thought as well as theories of race, power, and knowledge. His lecture will draw on his work about James Baldwin, Howard Thurman, and liberation in the twenty-first century.
- 1/27\***            **Interfaith Brunch and Workshop** sponsored by the Office of Institutional Diversity and Civic Engagement from 10:00-3:00 pm in the Alumni Center (86 Wentworth St).  
This workshop will feature prominent leaders from local faith-based organizations and is designed to equip and empower the community to address race through a loving lens. Issues to be explored are economic development, health equity and coalition building—all in line with MLK’s principles of the “Beloved Community.” [Registration](#) is required due to limited seating.
- 1/29\***            **“Food and Faith II—Feasting & Fasting: A Dialogue Between Muslims and Jews”**  
**Monday 6:30-8:30 pm in Arnold Hall JWST (96 Wentworth)**  
Join Muslim and Jewish students and community members for an informal conversation about cultural and religious points of contact. The event begins with a conversation between **Rabbi Michael Davies**, local Orthodox rabbi, and **Imam Abdel Majid**, Charleston Imam, moderated by Prof. **Elijah Siegler**. Following the moderated conversation, attendees will form breakout groups and discuss issues beyond food, including Jewish and Muslim prayer practices, pilgrimage, clothing, scripture, and charity. Capstoners are encouraged to help guide the sessions; contact [siegler@cofc.edu](mailto:siegler@cofc.edu) or [skerrysp@g.cofc.edu](mailto:skerrysp@g.cofc.edu)
- 1/31**            **The Civic Value of Religious Studies: Reflections on the “Ties that Bind”**  
**Reading:** (William Graham, “Why Study Religion in the Twenty-first Century?” and Robert Orsi, “Theorizing Closer to Home”)    **RC#3 due in class**
- 2/7**            **The Religious Studies Major and Liberal Arts Education**  
**Reading:** (AAR-Teagle White Paper “The Religious Studies Major and Liberal Education”)    **RC#4 due**  
**Guest:** **Michael Broderick (2010)** was a double major in RELS and ANTH; as a student he participated in the first RELS Study Abroad trip to India (2009) and directed a documentary film “Stay in de Boat” on Gullah-Geechee language, culture, and the future. After graduating he enrolled in the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program for three years in Iwate-ken Japan, and now he works as a Sales and Account Manager for Bloomberg LP in Hong Kong.
- 2/14**            **Know Thyself: Writing an Intellectual Autobiography**  
**Reading:** (Rachel Davis, “Finding Voices in Religious Studies” and Martin Marty, “Half a Life in Religious Studies: Confessions of an ‘Historical Historian’”)    **RC#5 due**  
**Writing:** **Write your intellectual autobiography**, due in class

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- 2/21**      **Using RELS to Promote Interfaith Understanding and Social Justice**  
**Reading:** (Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyers, “The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities;” H. Hart, “Atlanta Interfaith Manifesto & Atlanta Habitat for Humanity;” and “Compassionate Atlanta”)      **RC#6 due**
- Writing:**      **Peer Review of Intellectual Autobiography due**  
**Guest:**      **Haley Hart** (2012) currently serves as the President of the Board for Faith Alliance in Metro Atlanta, and is associate director of development at CARE, an international humanitarian NGO. Prior to this, she worked for Atlanta’s Habitat for Humanity, led a building trip to the Dominican Republic, and contributed to Habitat’s Faith and Community Partnership Fund
- 2/23-25\***      **Ripple Conference on “Healing Our World: Interfaith & Social Justice”**  
Elon University, sponsored by Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)  
A lot has happened in our nation and world in the past year: a contentious election, with others on all sides feeling alienated and demanding change; rising incidents of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia in the United States and Europe; and executive orders making many feel threatened and afraid. Now, more than ever, we need to learn to engage respectfully across differences and build relationships with people who are different from us. We need to listen, to share, and to serve. We are mindful also of renewed action on so many issues for so many identities and communities — black lives matter, LGBTQIA rights, women's rights, and immigrant rights — as well as the need to recognize intersectionality and the ongoing work of many religious and nonreligious communities to overcome global poverty. We may not agree on how to address all these issues, but let us commit to hearing one another's stories, to building relationships of mutual respect, and to working together for a more just, loving, and peaceful world for all persons, identities, and faiths. Together we can promote love and understanding in the face of fear and ignorance.
- 2/28**      **From Religious Studies to the Peace Corps to Graduate Work in Environmental Justice**  
**Reading:** (Katie Browne Peace Corps blog from Madagascar: “In Search of Malibu Barbie Tromba;” “The Sum of All Things;” “Goofus and Gallant” and “Attack of the Nacirema”)      **RC#7 due**
- Guest:**      **Katie Browne** (2009) served as captain of the Women’s Soccer Team at CofC, and then spent three years in the Peace Corps in Madagascar, working with the National Parks system. After returning to the US she earned a MS in Environmental Justice at the University of Michigan, and currently is completing her PhD at Michigan, where she studies local-to-global linkages in climate policy. Her graduate research has taken her to Alaska, Peru, Morocco, and Kenya.
- 3/2-4\***      **Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR) Conference**  
Atlanta, Marriott Perimeter Center  
The annual SECSOR conference provides an occasion for scholars in the academic study of religion, whether undergraduates, graduate students, or professors, to present and discuss ongoing research and to network with others in the region.
- 3/7**      **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#8 due in class**
- Guest:**      **Professor Lee Irwin**
- 3/14**      **Looking into the future—translating RELS skills into a career**  
CofC Career Center representative for presentation on creating a traditional resume
- Reading:** (“It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for Student Success” and “AAR Survey on the Long-Term Impact of the Religious Studies Major” [click on tabs on bottom to navigate, and make sure to read General Comments from CofC RELS Alumni])      **RC#9 due**
- Writing:**      **Crafting a resume or CV**      **Guest:**      **Jim Allison, Career Services**

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**3/21 Spring Break**

**3/27\* Simran Jeet Singh, “Turbans, Beards, and White Supremacy: Intersections of Race and Religion in Modern America” at 3:30 pm in Arnold Hall**

Dr. Simran Jeet Singh is an award-winning educator and scholar who speaks regularly on issues of inclusion, religion, and hate violence. As an Islamicist by training and a national spokesperson for the Sikh community in the United States, Singh is a foremost speaker on interfaith issues in America today and his background in scholarship, advocacy, and media relations will introduce students to the many different ways religious studies prepares students for the world beyond the classroom.

**3/28 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”) **RC#10 and 2-3 minute film due in class**

**4/4-25 Exit Interviews** Assessment of RELS program, requirements, structure of curriculum

**4/4 Know Thyself Even Better**

**Reading:** (Reading materials TBA) **RC#11 due in class**

**Guest:** **Rachel Davis Horton**

**Writing:** **Revise your intellectual autobiography**, integrate new insights gained from recent reading assignments and incorporate any feedback received from your peers and instructor

**4/11 Religion, Science, Comedy, and You**

**Reading:** (Three articles by Andrew Aghapour: “It’s All in Your Head”; and “Does Analytic Thinking Erode Religious Belief?” and “Our Failure to Understand Ferguson” and Monti videos) **RC#12 due**

**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 just completed his Ph.D dissertation. He studies the history of religion and science, he serves as a consultant with the Smithsonian Museum, and he teaches improv comedy and storytelling at the Dirty South Comedy Theater in Chapel Hill.

**4/18 Taking Stock and Gaining Closure**

**Reading:** (David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”) **RC#13 due**

What have you learned about yourself as a RELS student and what might you do with it or about it? How and why?

**4/25 “Final Exam” = Beer, Spirits, and Shared Stories at Edmund’s Oast Brewpub**

**Guest:** **Cameron Read (2007)** graduated with a double major in RELS and PHIL. After considering a career in academia and then spending time in European monasteries where spirits were brewed, Cam came back to work in Charleston’s Southend Brewery while brewing his own beer at home. He learned how to refine his own beer recipes and now serves as the head brewer at Edmund’s Oast, a brewpub that is his brainchild.

**If you would like to read more on the value of RELS see these on-line resources:**

- *Why Study Religion?* <http://www.studyreligion.org/why/index.html>
- *Studying Religion* (University of Alabama): <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html>
- *Religion Dispatches: Critical Analysis for the Common Good*: <http://religiondispatches.org/>
- *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion and the Public Sphere*: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/>

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**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.**

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**Talking Religion at 30,000 Feet**  
Michael Altman (class of 2005)

I lie a lot on airplanes. Not in any way that should upset the TSA or anything like that—just to the question “What do you do?” I don’t like admitting to strangers what it is I do. I’m a Ph.D. student in religious studies. I always have a book with me when I fly because I’m always supposed to be reading something. These books are usually about religion and American history or culture. They often tip people off. A friend of mine, another religious studies Ph.D. student, tells the story of the time he was reading *Isis Unveiled* in a local coffee shop. He was approached by a very excited man with an interest in Theosophy and other sorts of New Thought systems who talked his ear off for an hour. My friend is Catholic and was reading the book as a bit of research for some project or another.

The encounter between my Catholic friend and the enthusiastic Theosophist sums up why I feel uncomfortable on airplanes. I don’t want to run into true believers. I don’t mind telling someone I study religion. But it’s very different then to tell someone I study *their* religion. It just seems impolite. Like saying I study their grandmother’s recipes.

As I learned in college, religious studies is predicated on a notion of bracketing. “When we study religion academically,” professors tell students every semester, “we bracket our own beliefs and ideas so we can better understand others.” When I tell a stranger that I study religion in America the first question is always “What do you plan to do with that?” But the second question always begins, “so, what do you think about...” What do I think? I bracket what I think. That’s the point. Sometimes I try to bend the question to some neutral space where I can offer a well-informed opinion that brings historical clarity without actually taking a side. Other times I just mutter something and go back to my book and wonder if this bracketing is rude, unnecessary, and silly. Shouldn’t I just tell the tourist in seat 17B what I really think?

I recently happened upon a little book that answered that question for me. In his new history of the origins of the field, *Religion Enters the Academy* (a little three-chapter book perfect for plane rides), James Turner narrates the rise of comparative religion in America from the late eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth. In Turner’s story, the earliest scholars of world religions did not actually bracket their own beliefs. He says, “the discipline of religious studies was born from a felt need to measure Christianity against alternatives. Such comparison aimed either to make Christianity more persuasive to the ‘heathens’ or to perfect Christianity by locating the elements of a universal religion common to all people.” Religious studies began as a uniquely Christian project. The Christian template allowed for reductive, and even harmful, depictions of non-Christian religions. Furthermore, by keeping Christianity central, early studies in comparative religion universalized uniquely Christian categories. So, when you studied religion you studied texts, beliefs, and institutions—very nice Protestant categories. As Robert Orsi has put it, “Religious studies has been very much the theoretical enforcer of a normative and unchallenged liberal Protestant and Western religious modernity; to put this less theoretically, the academic study of religion [...] has long reinforced and given ‘scientific’ sanction to common social prejudices.” Orsi warns that the Christian project Turner describes is alive and well in the field. [...]

In our time, the failure to bracket might not lead to Christian bigotry in our understanding of religion. But it could lead to a secularist prejudice just as toxic. If the early investigators of world religions believed them to be lesser forms of Christian truth, then our own postmodern investigations might just as easily render them in categories derived from our own scientific or secularist dispositions. Religions were compared to Christianity in the past; now they can be explained away by science. Neither approach helps us understand the ways religions function in people’s lives. We need robust accounts of the sacred that avoid either sectarian prejudice on the one side and reductionism on the other. I’m not quite sure what that will look like, but I hope to find out.

**This (abridged) article appeared in *Religion Dispatches*, November 17, 2011.** Michael Altman became the second CofC RELS graduate to earn his PhD, and he currently teaches at the University of Alabama.