

RELS 451 Capstone Colloquium (Spring 2021)
Monday 1:00--1:50 pm @ Zoom
<https://cofc.zoom.us/j/95225805173> (Meeting ID: 952 2580 5173)

Instructor: Dr. Elijah Siegler, **Department of Religious Studies, College of Charleston**
Email: sieglere@cofc.edu Office phone: 953-3910
Office: 4 Glebe St. #201
Office Hours: MWF 12-1 and by appointment (either in my office via my personal Zoom link*)

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 review and assess your own study of religions at C of C by writing an essay that narrates your intellectual interests, analyzes your previous work in the study of religions, and considers 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) You 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 professional resume
 - c) a short film promoting Religious Studies
- 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 RELS alumni as guest speakers who will tell their stories and/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.

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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 before each meeting. Please print out the reading if you are able.

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'll be **dropped** from the course. If you have a legitimate excuse please let me know.

* **Active participation in seminar (15% 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.

* **A signed contract outlining which "outside-of-class" events you can participate in, and which you cannot and why (due via email Jan 23) plus abiding by that contract (5%** of overall grade)**

* **Weekly "Sunday Night" Emails (SNE) (10 out of 11, each worth 2%** for a total of 20% of overall grade). Every Sunday by 11 pm (or earlier) from 1/24 to 4/11 (excluding 3/14) you are to email me a one-paragraph written reflection and/or question related to the assigned reading for that week. You don't need to send it as an attachment, just embed it into the email. The paragraph should be focused on an issue from that week's reading 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 and would lead to interesting discussion.**

* **Two drafts of an intellectual autobiography** (first draft, 4-5 pages; second draft 6-7 pages) **(40% of overall grade)** 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 3/1; the final draft is due 4/3.

* **A professional resume/CV** that might be posted on a personal website or submitted as part of a job application **(5%** of grade)** due via email by 3/10, followed by an optional revision.

* **A peer review of a classmate's autobiography** (one single spaced page) **(5%** of overall grade)** produced after carefully reading their first draft and meeting in pairs outside of class.

* **A 2-3 minute film**, on what it meant to you being a religious studies major at the College of Charleston. Due in class 4/23 or earlier **(10% of overall grade)**

Grading Scale: A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72; D+: 67-69; D: 63-66; D-: 61-62 F: 60 or below.

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SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

- 1/11** **“Why Am I Religious Studies Major?”**
Reading: McArthur, “On Being a Religious Studies Major” (see last page of syllabus)
- 1/18** **MLK Day- NO CLASS**
- 1/25** **Keynote address: “Valuing Religious Studies in Madagascar and Michigan”**
Guest Alumna: Katie Brown
Reading: [“Body Ritual”](#); [User Profile](#); [Malibu Barbie Tromba](#); [Attack of the Nacirema](#)
- 2/1** **“Defending Your Major”**
Reading: [AAR Statement](#); “Talking Religion at 30,000 feet”; [“Why the World Needs Religious Studies”](#); Graham, “Why Study Religion in the Twenty-First Century?”
- 2/8** **“(Re)-learning How to Read in Israel and New York”**
Guest Alumna: Madeline “Mads” Lebin (Meet in person, location TBA)
Reading: Two Reviews of *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* by W. Sullivan
- 2/15** **“From Church Planter to Church Historian in Charleston”**
Guest Alumni: Caleb Melton
- 2/22** **“From Academic Passion to Public Scholarship in Denver”**
Guest Alumna: Madison Tarleton
- 3/1** **Know Thyself: Your Intellectual Autobiography**
Intellectual autobiography, first draft, due via email before class
- 3/8** **“From Interfaith Dialogue to Social Justice in Atlanta”**
Guest Alumna: Haley Hart
- 3/10** **Professional CV or Resume, due via email**
- 3/15** **“Get a Job!”**
Special Guest: Jim Allison, Executive Director, College of Charleston Career Center
- 3/22** **“From International Education to Event Planning in India and Washington DC”**
Guest Alumna: Madeline “MJ” Welch
- 3/29** **“From Academia to Activism in Alabama”**
Guest Alumni: Dr. Mike Altman and Emily Steinichen Altman

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- 4/5 **“Know Thyself Even Better”**
 Intellectual autobiography, final draft, due via email
- 4/12 **“From Science Writer to Storyteller in North Carolina”**
 Guest Alumnus: Dr. Andrew Aghapour
- 4/19 **“Brewing Up Some Religion”**
 Guest Alumnus: Cameron Read (Meet at Edmund’s Oast Beer Exchange)
- 4/23 **Short films due**
- 4/26 **“Final Exam”: Short films screened, followed by group lunch?**

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Note: Students with documented disabilities who have been approved to receive accommodation through SNAP should feel free to discuss this during office hours. For more information, contact Disability Services at 953-1431.

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The Center for Student Learning has writing labs and can arrange individual tutoring for this particular class. Drop by, go to <http://www.cofc.edu/~csl/> or call 953-5635.

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Technology policy: It breaks. An issue you may have with technology is no excuse for late work. You need to protect yourself by managing your time and backing up your work.

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***Communication:** Email me at sieglere@cofc.edu if you have any issues regarding the course. I will respond within 24 hours (or less!). We can also arrange to meet at your convenience in my office or on my personal Zoom link: <https://cofc.zoom.us/my/elijahsieglers> (Meeting ID: 970 905 9200)

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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.