RELIGIOUS STUDIES (RELS)

RELS 002 Religions of the West
This course surveys some of the core beliefs and practices within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To do so, we will focus on history and memory, exploring how key figures and formative events from the past have been made present, from generation to generation, through scripture, ritual, liturgy, and remembrance. Special attention will be given to points of interaction between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as to the impact of their intertwined histories on the formation and development of Western cultures. Fulfills History & Tradition Sector.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Reed
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 003 Religion and Literature
A consideration of how great works of literature from different cultural traditions have reclaimed and reinterpreted compelling religious themes. The focus this semester will be on themes of creation, especially the creation of human beings, from ancient myths of different cultures to modern science fiction. This course fulfills the General Requirement in Sector 3, Arts and Letters.
For BA Students: Arts and Letters Sector
Taught by: Matter
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
Notes: Theme of the course will change from term to term. See syllabus for more info.

RELS 004 Art and Religion
What is religious art and what makes art religious? This course will survey a wide variety of artistic expressions from a number of religious traditions which draw on spiritual themes, are inspired by religious experiences or texts, and which serve an important role in religious practice and belief. Some of the themes which this course will explore are: visualization and action within the cosmos, passion and religious ecstasy, the material culture of personal devotion, icons and iconoclasm, depictions of the miraculous, and the relationship between word and image. Objects and images from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism and will be explored along with examples from other traditions.
Taught by: Muravchick
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 005 Gender, Sexuality, & Religion
What does it mean to be a Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or spiritual woman or man? How important are the gender differences in deciding social roles, ritual activities, and spiritual vocations? How does gender intersect with nationality, language, and politics? This course tackles all of these questions, showing how gender- it's definition and the way it is taught and performed- is central to understanding religion. In this course we will learn about women's and men's rituals, social roles, and mythologies in specific religious traditions. We will also look at the central significance of gender to the field of religious studies generally, with particular attention to non-binary genders. The first part of the course will be focused on building a foundation of knowledge about a range of religious traditions and the role of women in those traditions. This course emphasizes religious traditions outside the West. Although it is beyond the scope of this class to offer comprehensive discussions of any one religious tradition, the aim is to provide entry points into the study of religious traditions through the lens of gender. This course will emphasize both historical perspectives and contemporary contexts. We will read religion through a variety of feminist and queer theory lenses- exploring the key characteristics of diverse feminist analyses of religion, as well as limits of specific feminist approaches.
Taught by: Robb
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 010 Religion in Public Life
This seminar is an introduction to several aspects of the hotly debated relation between religion and public life in America. In the first half of the course we will study two books by law professors, one Jewish and the other Christian. Their debate will introduce us to the legal and historical background, and to the continuing challenges of church-state separation in America. The second half of the course will examine the claim that we now live in a "new religious America," one in which the increasing presence of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims has created a new pluralism and a new set of challenges. We will then consider the argument of one historian that diversity and difference have characterized religious groups in America since at least the 19th century, and that this has resulted in a number of paradoxical social situations. Finally, we will close with a brief look at the claim that there exists in America a "civil religion," one that unites all citizens despite their other religious differences.
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 013 Gods, Ghosts, and Monsters
This course seeks to be a broad introduction. It introduces students to the diversity of doctrines held and practices performed, and art produced about "the fantastic" from earliest times to the present. The fantastic (the uncanny or supernatural) is a fundamental category in the scholarly study of religion, art, anthropology, and literature. This course will focus both theoretical approaches to studying supernatural beings from a Religious Studies perspective while drawing examples from Buddhist, Shinto, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian, Egyptian, Central Asian, Native American, and Afro-Caribbean sources from earliest examples to the present including mural, image, manuscript, film, codex, and even comic books. It will also introduce students to related humanistic categories of study: material and visual culture, theodicy, cosmology, shamanism, transcendentality, soteriology, eschatology, phantasmatography, spiritualism, mysticism, theophany, and the historical power of rumor. It will serve as a gateway course into the study of Religion among numerous Asian, and East Asian Studies, as well as Visual Culture and Film Studies. It will include guest lectures from professors from several departments, as well as an extensive hands-on use of the collections of the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the manuscripts held in the Schoenberg Collection of Van Pelt Library. It aims to not only introduce students to major approaches, and terms in the study of religion and the supernatural, but inspire them to take more advanced courses by Ilya Vinitsky, Liliane Weissberg, Projit Mukharji, Talya Fishman, Annette Reed, David Barnes, David Spafford, Frank Chance, Michael Meister, Paul Goldin, Renata Holod, Paul Rozin, among several others.

For BA Students: Humanities and Social Science Sector
Taught by: McDaniel
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 014 Myths and Religions of the Ancient World
This course will survey the religions of the ancient Middle East, situating each in its historical and socio-cultural context and focussing on the key issues of concern to humanity: creation, birth, the place of humans in the order of the universe, death and destruction. The course will cover not only the better known cultures from the area, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, but also some lesser known traditions, such as those of the Hurrians, or of the ancient Mediterranean town of Ugarit. Religion will not be viewed merely as a separate, sealed-off element of the ancient societies, but rather as an element in various cultural contexts, for example the relationship between religion and magic, and the role of religion in politics being recurring topics in the survey. Background readings for the lectures will be drawn not only from the modern scholarly literature, but also from the words of the ancients themselves in the form of their myths, rituals and liturgies.

For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Frame
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 024 Archaeology and the Bible
Archaeology and the Bible is a chronological survey of the long span of human occupation in the Land of the Bible, known by the names of the modern nation- states and political entities that occupy the area, as well as various short hands such as Levant and Syria-Palestine, from ca. 10,000 BCE, when humans first began to farm and herd animals through the time of the Divided Monarchy of Israel and Judah. While archaeology has moved beyond a primary concern with illuminating the Bible, NELC155 will investigate the broader import of archaeological discoveries for our understanding of ancient Israel and its neighbors.

Taught by: Zettler
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 027 Great Books of Judaism
The Babylonian Talmud, known simply as the Bavli, is the foundational legal and ethical document of rabbinic Judaism. It is one of the best read works of world literature, and it is the most widely disseminated and revered rabbinic work. It not only contains legal discussions and rulings but rather it also presents the worldview of the rabbis. This course will analyze and contextualize the perspectives of the Talmud towards the important phases of life. We will examine in-depth several Talmudic passages relating to the various stages of the human lifecycle: birth and naming of the child; circumcision, bar/bat mitzva and adulthood; earning a livelihood and choosing a career; marriage and divorce; procreation and raising children; death, burial, mourning and the belief in the resurrection of the dead among others. We will evaluate these teachings in light of other traditions and in their broader late antiquity and contemporary contexts. All texts will be read in their English translation but originals will be provided.

For BA Students: Arts and Letters Sector
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 028 Religion in America
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
RELS 030 Gurus, Prophets & Aliens: Understanding New Religious Movements
This course offers a thematic introduction to the history of New Religious Movements (NRM) from the mid-19th century to the present day. Often labeled as "cults" by the state and established religious institutions, new religions offer modern believers alternative spiritual and ideological solutions to age-old problems. In this class, students will be introduced to the teachings and practices of prominent NRMs in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, from wide-spread movements such as Scientology, Mormonism, and the Unification Church to lesser known groups such as the Church of the Almighty God, Neo-Paganism, and Raelism. We will explore the emergence of the anti-cult campaign in the second half of the 20th century, the relationship between apocalyptic sects such as the Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians and political and social protest, and the role of Asian religions such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation in the development of New Age religiosity. In addition, we will learn how new religious movements such as Wicca and the Children of God helped reshape gender roles and changed mainstream views about sexuality, and how developments in mass media and popular culture contributed to the creation of new groups such as the Star Wars inspired Temple of the Jedi Order (Jediism), the Church of the Latter-Day Dude (Dudeism), as well as UFO religions such as Heaven's Gate. Throughout the semester, students will be exposed to a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, from academic articles and scholarly essays to documentaries, feature films, and TV shows. No previous knowledge in Religious Studies is required.
Taught by: Tavor
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 031 Religion and Violence
Perhaps nothing haunts modern politics more than religious violence. Killing sprees done in the name of God reveal the limits of political power. What spaces is left for the rule of law when appeals to dogma and the divine supersede reason? The causes and nature of divinely motivated violence are so mystifying that they are a constant topic of debate among academics, political parties, and news commentators. What really motivates religious violence? Is it just economic of class grievances in disguise? Are all religions prone to violence? Are some religions more violent than others? Or, are religions only violent when they go awry, denying their true messages? And does religion need to be quarantined and privatized, to keep us all safe? In this course, we'll probe the dividing line separating religion from politics in an effort to better understand the causes and nature of religious violence. How do we know the difference between religious violence and political violence? What makes religion violent, and what makes violence religious?
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 033 Modern Catholic Christianity
At the turn of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud hypothesized that religion was a dead duck. Many other thinkers of "modernity" have agreed with his thesis; and yet, over a century later, it is clear that religion is still a forceful presence in human culture. One religious tradition that has survived to the surprise (and even consternation) of some critics, is Roman Catholic Christianity. This Freshman Seminar will look closely at the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century, to explore the ways in which Catholicism has (and has not) adapted to modernity. We will begin with an investigation into the history of Roman Catholicism; how it is defined, and how it developed in relation to politics and culture in the Roman Empire, medieval and early modern Europe, and in the Americas; but most of the semester will focus on the Catholic Church of the past 200 years, especially as it appears in the United States. We will consider the relationship of Catholicism to many aspects of modern life, including science and technology, political systems and leaders, aesthetics (visual arts, music, literature and film), and understandings of gender and sexuality. There will be a mid-term examination and a final paper of 6 to 10 pages.
Taught by: Matter
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 068 India: Culture & Society
What makes India INDIA? Religion and Philosophy? Architectural splendor? Kingdoms? Caste? The position of women? This course will introduce students to India by studying a range of social and cultural institutions that have historically assumed to be definitive India. Through primary texts, novels and historical sociological analysis, we will ask how these institutions have been reproduced and transformed, and assess their significance for contemporary Indian society.
For BA Students: Humanities and Social Science S
Taught by: Sreenivasan
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
0 Course Units

RELS 069 Love Sex and Death
This course focuses on important constants of human life as they are grappled with across religious traditions. Drawing on data across a range of religious traditions (such as Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Mesoamerican Religion), we will explore topics such as sexual identity, politics, religion and the individual in contemporary life; and eroticism, sex and love as they are reflected in religious literature, art and history. Divine love and religious devotion will be examined in relation to acts of violence, including human sacrifice and self-sacrifice in the past as well as the present. Other important questions considered in this course include: how does the body function as the locus in which religion is enacted? What is the conflict between our agency over our bodies and socioreligious claims over individual autonomy? Is violence an integral part of religion? What are religious understandings of the relationship between our agency over our bodies and socioreligious claims over individual autonomy? Is violence an integral part of religion? What are religious understandings of the relationship between love and sex? What does it mean for human beings to love God?
Taught by: Jamal Elias
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
REL 091 Native American Literature
From oral traditions to Youtube videos of Native American hip hop, this course surveys the diverse body of Native American literature through its many transformations across the centuries. The course will focus primarily on contemporary Native American literature, an era known as the Native American Renaissance. We will read literary works by Black Elk, Leslie Marmon Silko, Sherman Alexie, N. Scott Momaday, and others. The course will also include films such as Smoke Signals and Whale Rider.
Taught by: Powell
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

REL 101 Religion and Evolution
This class will explore encounters between religion and evolutionary sciences, from the 19th century to the present. We will consider the history of evolutionary biology’s entanglements with faith, from the initial explosion of interest in the wake of Darwin’s Origin of the Species in 1859 to contemporary debates about creationism and intelligent design here in Pennsylvania in the 21st century. In the first half of the class, we will look at works by writers, philosophers, and theologians from around the world and a range of religious traditions have assessed the evolution-religion relationship — some seeing conflict, others concord. In the second half, we will consider evolutionary approaches to the origins of religion, from late-19th century accounts to modern cognitive science and group selection theories. Topics covered will include scientific racism, sociobiology and the evolutionary origins of morality, primate religion, and the relationship between science, religion, and politics.
Taught by: Schaefer
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

REL 102 Sacred Stuff: Religious Bodies, Places, and Objects
Does religion start with what’s in our heads? Or are religious commitments made, shaped and strengthened by the people, places, and things around us? This course will explore how religion happens in the material world. We’ll start with classical and contemporary theories on the relationship of religion to stuff. We’ll then consider examples of how religion is animated not just by texts, but through interactions with objects, spaces, bodies, monuments, color, design, architecture, and film. We’ll ask how these material expressions of religion move beyond private faith and connect religion to politics and identity.
Taught by: Schaefer
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

REL 108 Introduction to Folklore
The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the subjects of the discipline of Folklore, their occurrence in social life, and the scholarly analysis of their use in culture. As a discipline, folklore explores the manifestations of expressive forms in both traditional & modern societies, in small-scale groups where people interface with each face-to-face, and in large-scale, often industrial societies, in which the themes, symbols, and forms that permeate traditional life, occupy new positions, or occur in different occasions in everyday life. For some of you, the distinction will not be helpful. In traditional societies, and within all groups that define themselves ethnically, professionally, or culturally, within modern heterogeneous societies in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and Australia, folklore plays a more prominent role in society than it appears to play in literate cultures on the same continents. Consequently, the study of folklore and the analysis of its forms are appropriate in traditional as well as modern societies, and in any society that is in a transitional phase.
For BA Students: Humanities and Social Science S
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

REL 109 Witchcraft and Possession
This course explores world witchcraft and possession from the persecutions of the early seventeenth century through the rise of Wicca in the twentieth century. The mere mention of these terms, or of such close cousins as demonology, sorcery, exorcism, magic, and the witches Sabbath, raises clear ethnographic and historical challenges. How can the analysis of witchcraft— including beliefs, patterns of accusation, the general social position of victims, the intensity and timing of witch hunts, and its relation to religious practice, law, language, gender, social marginalization, and property—lead us to a more humane understanding of belief and action? Films such as The Exorcist, The Blair Witch Project, The Crucible, and Three Sovereigns for Sarah will focus discussion.
For BA Students: Humanities and Social Science S
Taught by: St.George
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Recitation
1 Course Unit

REL 110 American Jesus
Images and beliefs about Jesus have always been a compelling part of American life. This course seeks to examine the social, political, religious and artistic ways that Jesus has been appropriated and used in American life, making him a unique figure for exploring American religious life. Special attention will be given to how Jesus is used to shape social and political concerns, including race, gender, sexuality and culture.
Taught by: Butler
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 111 God & Money
The relationship between how people understand god(s) and money has always been a complicated one. Many religions have a relationship to money, whether in offerings, asking for blessings, or to build and create places of worship. God and Money explores the relationship between how religions view money, capitalism, and religion, and how movements like the prosperity gospel have expanded and complicated the interplay between religion, money and capitalism around the world.
Taught by: Butler
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 112 Religious Ethics and Modern Society
Religious beliefs of Malcolm X and MLK formed their social action during the Civil Rights for African Americans. This seminar will explore the religious religious biographies of each leader, how religion shaped their public and private personas, and the transformative and transgressive role that religion played in the history of the Civil Rights movement in the United States and abroad. Students in this course will leave with a clearer understanding of religious beliefs of Christianity, The Nation of Islam, and Islam, as well as religiously based social activism. Other course emphases include the public and private roles of religion within the context of the shaping of ideas of freedom, democracy, and equality in the United States, the role of the “Black church” in depicting messages of democracy and freedom, and religious oratory as exemplified through MLK and Malcolm X.
Taught by: Butler
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 114 The Religion of Ancient Egypt
Weekly lectures (some of which will be illustrated) and a field trip to the University Museum’s Egyptian Section. The multifaceted approach to the subject matter covers such topics as funerary literature and religion, cults, magic religious art and architecture, and the religion of daily life.
Taught by: Silverman/Wegner
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 117 African American Religion
The unique history and experiences of African Americans can be traced through religion and belief. Through the mediums of literature, politics, music, and film, students will explore the religious experience of people of the African Diaspora within the context of the complex history of race in American history. The course will cover a broad spectrum of African American religious experience including Black Nationalism, urban religions, the “black church” and African religious traditions such as Santeria and Rastafarianism. Special attention will be paid to the role of race, gender, sexuality, and popular culture in the African American religious experience.
Taught by: Butler
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 118 Religion & Cinema in India
This seminar examines key themes in the study of religion and Indian cinema. The aim of the seminar is to foreground discussions of performativity, visual culture, representation, and politics in the study of modern South Asian religions. Themes include mythological cinema, gender and sexuality, censorship and the state, and communalism and secularism. The films we will be deploying as case studies will be limited to those produced in Hindi, Telugu and Tamil (the three largest cinema cultures of India). No knowledge of South Asian language is needed for this course however.
Taught by: Soneji
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 120 Jews and Judaism in Antiquity
A broad introduction to the history of Jewish civilization from its Biblical beginnings to the Middle Ages, with the main focus on the formative period of classical rabbinic Judaism and on the symbiotic relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Dohrmann
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 121 Med and Early Mod Jewry
Exploration of intellectual, social, and cultural developments in Jewish civilization from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the assault on established conceptions of faith and religious authority in 17th century Europethat is, from the age of Mohammed to that of Spinoza. Particular attention will be paid to the interaction of Jewish culture with those of Christianity and Islam.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Ruderman
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 122 History of Jewish Civilization: 17th Century to the Present
This course offers an intensive survey of the major currents in Jewish culture and society from the late middle ages to the present. Focusing upon the different societies in which Jews have lived, the course explores Jewish responses to the political, socio-economic, and cultural challenges of modernity. Topics to be covered include the political emancipation of Jews, the creation of new religious movements within Judaism, Jewish socialism, Zionism, the Holocaust, and the emergence of new Jewish communities in Israel and the United States. No prior background in Jewish history is expected.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Wenger
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
RELS 124 American Jewish Experience
This course offers a comprehensive survey of American Jewish history from the colonial period to the present. It will cover the different waves of Jewish immigration to the United States and examine the construction of Jewish political, cultural, and religious life in America. Topics will include: American Judaism, the Jewish labor movement, Jewish politics and popular culture, and the responses of American Jews to the Holocaust and the State of Israel.
Taught by: Wenger
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 126 Jewish Mysticism
Survey of expressions of Jewish mysticism from Hebrew Scripture through the 21st century. Topics include rabbinic concerns about mystical speculation, the ascent through the celestial chambers - heikhalot; the Book of Creation, the relationship of Jewish philosophy and mysticism, techniques of letter permutation, schematization of the Divine Body, the prominence of gender and sexuality in kabbalistic thought, the relationship of kabbalah to the practice of the commandments, Zohar, Lurianic kabbalah, Hasidism, New-Age Jewish spirituality and the resurgence of Jewish mysticism in the 20th century. All readings will be in English translation.
For BA Students: Arts and Letters Sector
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 129 Themes in the Jewish Tradition
Course topics will vary; have included The Binding of Isaac, Responses to Catastrophes in Jewish History, Holy Men & Women (Ben-Amos); Rewriting the Bible (Dohrmann); Performing Judaism (Fishman); Jewish Political Thought (Fishman); Jewish Esotericism (Lorberbaum). Democratic culture assumes the democracy of knowledge - the accessibility of knowledge and its transparency. Should this always be the case? What of harmful knowledge? When are secrets necessary? In traditional Jewish thought, approaching the divine has often assumed an aura of danger. Theological knowledge was thought of as restricted. This seminar will explore the "open" and "closed" in theological knowledge, as presented in central texts of the rabbinic tradition: the Mishnah, Maimonides and the Kabbalah. Primary sources will be available in both Hebrew and English.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 130 How to Read the Bible
While the Bible may be the most read text in the world, it is not clear that anyone understands what it actually means. Secular scholars read the Bible as they would any other ancient document, trying to understand who wrote it and what it reveals about the past, but that is not how the Bible is understood by billions of millions of readers who embrace it as a message from God and read its contents not just to learn about the past but to understand what the meaning of life is, how to be a good person, and where the world is headed. How is it that the Bible is read in such different ways by the secular and the religious? Who is right in the struggle over its meaning, and how does one go about deciphering that meaning in the first place?
Taught by: WEITZMAN
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 132 The History of God
This course introduces the history of God as understood by modern scholars of religion. Why do people believe in gods in the first place? How is the God of the Old Testament different from earlier Near Eastern deities, or different from God as represented in the New Testament and the Quran? When and why did people come to question the existence of God, and how has the idea of God changed in the last century in light of experiences like the Holocaust, social movements like feminism, and the rise of new technologies like the Internet? This course will address these questions as it surveys the approaches scholars have developed to comprehend the history of a being who would seem beyond human comprehension.
Taught by: Wietzman
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 135 Introduction to the New Testament
What can be known - from historical perspectives - about the life and teachings of Jesus and his earliest followers? Did Jesus see himself as a teacher and/or a revolutionary and/or the messiah? If Jesus and the apostles were all Jews, how did Christianity emerge as a distinct "religion" distinct from Judaism? And how is it that this small Galilean and Judean movement came to shape world history and Western culture even to this day? This course explores these questions through a focus on the formation of the New Testament - from the letters of Paul in the early first century CE, to the collection and closure of the canon of Christian Scriptures in the fourth century CE. In the process, we will explore the lived worlds of the first followers of Jesus through readings of texts within and outside the New Testament but also through art, artifacts, and manuscripts at Penn and in Philadelphia.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
RELS 136 Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Judaism and Christianity
This course surveys the development of concepts about death and the afterlife in Judaism and Christianity, exploring the cultural and socio-historical contexts of the formation of beliefs about heaven and hell, the end of the world, martyrdom, immortality, resurrection, and the problem of evil. Readings cover a broad range of ancient sources, including selections from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, as well as other Jewish and Christian writings (e.g., "apocrypha," "pseudepigrapha," Dead Sea Scrolls, classical rabbinic literature, Church Fathers, "gnostic" and "magical" materials). In the process, this course introduces students to formative eras and ideas in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Western culture.
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 137 Religion and the Global Future
What role is religion playing in shaping the future of the globe? Has it made the world more or less dangerous? Can it help humanity address challenges like international conflict, climate change and poverty, or is it making those problems worse? The goal of this course is to help students think through these questions in light of the scholarship on religion and its intersections with international relations and public policy.
Taught by: Weitzman, Harf
Course usually offered in spring term
Prerequisite: Permission needed from instructor
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 143 Introduction to Islam
This course is an introduction to Islam as a religion as it exists in societies of the past as well as the present. It explores the many ways in which Muslims have interpreted and put into practice the prophetic message of Muhammad through historical and social analyses of varying theological, philosophical, legal, political, mystical and literary writings, as well as through visual art and music. The aim of the course is to develop a framework for explaining the sources and symbols through which specific experiences and understandings have been signified as Islamic, both by Muslims and by other peoples with whom they have come into contact, with particular emphasis given to issues of gender, religious violence and changes in beliefs and behaviors which have special relevance for contemporary society.
Taught by: Elias
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 150 Introduction to the Bible (The "Old Testament")
An introduction to the major themes and ideas of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), with attention to the contributions of archaeology and modern Biblical scholarship, including Biblical criticism and the response to it in Judaism and Christianity. All readings are in English.
Taught by: Cranz
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 155 Introduction to Indian Philosophy
This course will take the student through the major topics of Indian philosophy by first introducing the fundamental concepts and terms that are necessary for a deeper understanding of themes that pervade the philosophical literature of India – arguments for against the existence of God, for example, the ontological status of external objects, the means of valid knowledge, standards of proof, the discourse on the aims of life. The readings will emphasize classical Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophical articulations (from 700 B.C.E. to 16th century C.E.) but we will also supplement our study of these materials with contemporary or relatively recent philosophical writings in modern India.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Patel
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 163 Introduction to Hinduism
This course introduces students to the history, texts, philosophies and rituals of South Asia’s oldest living religious traditions, represented today by the term “Hinduism.” At the same time, it problematizes the idea of a monolithic “Hindu Tradition,” in favor of an approach that recognizes several distinct, dynamic, yet symbiotic Hindu religious cultures. The course also places emphasis on the vitality of today’s Hinduism(s), and the various historical, ritual, cultural, and social contexts that they represent and constitute. The course is organized around six modules: (1) Issues in the Academic Study of Hinduism; (2) Sanskrit (textual) tradition; (3) Philosophy; (4) Theology; (5) Ritual; (6) Modernity and Contemporary Politics.
Taught by: Soneji
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 164 History, Culture, and Religion in Early India
This course surveys the culture, religion and history of India from 2500 BCE to 1200 CE. The course examines the major cultural, religious and social factors that shaped the course of early Indian history. The following themes will be covered: the rise and fall of Harappan civilization, the Aryan invasion and vedic India, the rise of cities, states and the religions of Buddhism and Jainism, the historical context of the growth of classical Hinduism, including the Mahabharata, Ramayana and the development of the theistic temple cults of Saivism and Vaisnavism, processes of medieval agrarian expansion and cultic incorporation as well as the spread of early Indian cultural ideas in Southeast Asia. In addition to assigned secondary readings students will read select primary sources on the history religion and culture of early India, including Vedic and Buddhist texts, Puranas and medieval temple inscriptions. Major objectives of the course will be to draw attention to India’s early cultural and religious past and to assess contemporary concerns and ideologies in influencing our understanding and representation of that past.
For BA Students: History and Tradition Sector
Taught by: Ali
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
RELS 172 East Asian Religions
This course introduces religious traditions in China, Japan, and Taiwan from ancient to contemporary times, with emphases on their sociopolitical contexts, visual and material dimensions, and entanglement with gender, sexuality and the body. We will examine the history of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Shinto, as well as the practices, thoughts, and institutions that do not fall squarely into those categories. We will pay attention to the relationship between textual and oral traditions, and that between canons, rituals and the popular practices from both historical and anthropological perspectives.
Taught by: Cheng H
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 173 Introduction to Buddhism
This course seeks to introduce students to the diversity of doctrines held and practices performed by Buddhists in Asia. By focusing on how specific beliefs and practices are tied to particular locations and particular times, we will be able to explore in detail the religious institutions, artistic, architectural, and musical traditions, textual production and legal and doctrinal developments of Buddhism over time and within its socio-historical context. Religion is never divorced from its place and its time. Furthermore, by geographically and historically grounding the study of these religions we will be able to examine how their individual ethic, cosmological and soteriological systems effect local history, economics, politics, and material culture. We will concentrate first on the person of the Buddha, his many biographies and how he has been followed and worshipped in a variety of ways from Lhasa, Tibet to Phrae, Thailand. From there we touch on the foundational teachings of the Buddha with an eye to how they have evolved and transformed over time. Finally, we focus on the practice of Buddhist ritual, magic and ethics in monasteries and among lay communities in Asia and even in the West. This section will confront the way Buddhists have thought of issues such as “Just-War,” Women’s Rights and Abortion. While no one quarter course could provide a detailed presentation of the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, my hope is that we will be able to look closely at certain aspects of these religions by focusing on how they are practiced in places like Nara, Japan or Vietnam, Laos.
Taught by: McDaniel
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 184 What is Taoism?
Our main goal in this course will be to answer the question, “what is Daoism?” Students will be introduced to a wide variety of ideas and practices that have at one time or another been labeled as “Daoist” in order to sort out the different senses of the term, and consider whether they have any common features. The course will begin with the Laozi, the most translated work in world literature besides the Bible and the one text affirmed by virtually all “Daoist” traditions as foundational. We will also survey several other bio- spiritual practices, such as the meditational techniques of Internal Alchemy and the self-cultivation regimens known today as Qigong and Tai-chi, and familiarize ourselves with theological and ritual foundations of the organized religious tradition known as “Daoism,” which is still widely practiced across East Asia. No knowledge of Chinese is presumed. All readings will be in English.
Taught by: Goldin
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 203 The Religious Other
Course explores attitudes toward monotheists of other faiths, and claims made about these “religious Others” in real and imagined encounters between Jews, Christians and Muslims from antiquity to the present. Strategies of “othering” will be analyzed through an exploration of claims about the Other’s body, habits and beliefs, as found in works of scripture, law, theology, polemics, art, literature and reportage. Attention will be paid to myths about the other, inter-group violence, converts, cases of cross-cultural influence, notions of toleration, and perceptions of Others in contemporary life. Primary sources will be provided in English.
Taught by: Fishman
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 204 The Graphic Novel and Religious Identities
Graphic novels and comic books express a variety of popular conceptions of a variety of religious beliefs and practices performed by Buddhists in Asia. By focusing on how specific beliefs and practices are tied to particular locations and particular times, we will be able to explore in detail the religious institutions, artistic, architectural, and musical traditions, textual production and legal and doctrinal developments of Buddhism over time and within its socio-historical context. Religion is never divorced from its place and its time. Furthermore, by geographically and historically grounding the study of these religions we will be able to examine how their individual ethic, cosmological and soteriological systems effect local history, economics, politics, and material culture. We will concentrate first on the person of the Buddha, his many biographies and how he has been followed and worshipped in a variety of ways from Lhasa, Tibet to Phrae, Thailand. From there we touch on the foundational teachings of the Buddha with an eye to how they have evolved and transformed over time. Finally, we focus on the practice of Buddhist ritual, magic and ethics in monasteries and among lay communities in Asia and even in the West. This section will confront the way Buddhists have thought of issues such as “Just-War,” Women’s Rights and Abortion. While no one quarter course could provide a detailed presentation of the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, my hope is that we will be able to look closely at certain aspects of these religions by focusing on how they are practiced in places like Nara, Japan or Vietnam, Laos.
Taught by: McDaniel
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 208 A History of Films By and About Native Americans
This course will examine films by and about Native Americans. From the very beginnings of film history, Native Americans have been a centrally important subject. While much of the writing about Native American films tends to focus on the perpetuation of stereotypes, this class will concentrate on four primary themes: 1) the role that film plays in helping the audience to understand the exceedingly complex place of indigenous people in “American” identity (with “American” signifying, in this instance, a hemispheric sense of identity); 2) the myriad of ways that indigenous people have been involved in the history of film as extras, actors, directors, producers; 3) how representations changed when Native Americans took control of production; 4) the ways in which films by and about Native Americans have helped to heal the historical trauma resulting from the “Indian Wars” that have gone on for 500+ years on the North American continent.
Taught by: Powell
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 211 Religion and Ecology
This class will introduce the overlaps between religion and ecology. Rather than assuming that there is a necessary positive or negative relationship between religion and ecology, we will look at how these relationships have materialized in complicated ways at different moments in history. We'll consider perspectives and case studies from a range of different traditions, with a special attention paid to the genesis of the field of Religion and Ecology in critiques of Christian attitudes toward the environment in the 1960s and 1970s. Taught by: Covey
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 223 Jewish Literature in the Middle Ages in Translation
Course explores the cultural history of Jews in the lands of Islam from the time of Mohammed through the late 17th century (end of Ottoman expansion into Europe) -- in Iraq, the Middle East, al-Andalus and the Ottoman Empire. Primary source documents (in English translation) illuminate minority-majority relations, internal Jewish tensions (e.g., Qaraism), and developments in scriptural exegesis, rabbinic law, philosophy, poetry, polemics, mysticism and liturgy. Graduate students have additional reading and meetings. Spring 2015. Taught by: Fishman/Stern
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 224 The Bible in Translation
This course introduces undergraduates and graduate students to one specific Book of the Hebrew Bible. "The Bible in Translation" involves an in-depth reading of a biblical source against the background of contemporary scholarship. Depending on the book under discussion, this may also involve a contextual reading with other biblical books and the textual sources of the ancient Near East. Although no prerequisites are required, RELS 224 is a perfect follow-up course for RELS 125 "Intro to the Bible." Taught by: Cranz
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 225 Introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls
Exploration of the issues relating to the identification and history of the people who produced and used these materials as well as the claims made about the inhabitants of the Qumran site near the caves in which the scrolls were discovered, with a focus on what can be known about the community depicted by some of the scrolls, its institutions and religious life, in relation to the known Jewish groups at that time (the beginning of the Common Era). This will involve detailed description and analysis of the writings found in the caves -- sectarian writings, "apocrypha" and "pseudepigrapha" biblical texts and interpretations. Taught by: Reed
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 230 Topics in European History
Topics vary. One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 233 Jewish Literature in the Middle Ages in Translation
Course explores the cultural history of Jews in the lands of Islam from the time of Mohammed through the late 17th century (end of Ottoman expansion into Europe) -- in Iraq, the Middle East, al-Andalus and the Ottoman Empire. Primary source documents (in English translation) illuminate minority-majority relations, internal Jewish tensions (e.g., Qaraism), and developments in scriptural exegesis, rabbinic law, philosophy, poetry, polemics, mysticism and liturgy. Graduate students have additional reading and meetings. Spring 2015. Taught by: Fishman/Stern
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 234 The Devil's Pact in Literature, Music and Film
This class will introduce the overlaps between religion and ecology. Rather than assuming that there is a necessary positive or negative relationship between religion and ecology, we will look at how these relationships have materialized in complicated ways at different moments in history. We'll consider perspectives and case studies from a range of different traditions, with a special attention paid to the genesis of the field of Religion and Ecology in critiques of Christian attitudes toward the environment in the 1960s and 1970s. Taught by: Covey
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 235 Eastern Christianities
The history of Christianity is often told from the perspective of its spread westward from Israel to Rome. Yet, in the first millennium, there were more Christians living in the East, in places as far away as Persia, Yemen, India, China, and Mongolia, than in the West. Spread across the Asian continent, these Christians were actively involved in local and imperial politics, composed theological literature, and were deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of their host societies. This course traces the spread of Christianity eastward, paying particular attention to its regional developments, its negotiations with local political powers, and its contact with other religions, including Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Islam. Readings will cover a broad range of sources, including selections from classical Syriac literature, Manichaean texts, Mesopotamian magic bowls, the so-called "Jesus Sutras," and the Quran. All readings will be provided in English, and no background is presumed. Taught by: Han
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 236 The Devil's Pact in Literature, Music and Film
For as long as we have been modern, the legend of the devil’s pact has been the preferred metaphor for the desire to surpass the limits of human knowledge and power at any cost. Starting with the sixteenth-century Faust Book, which recounts the story of a scholar, alchemist and necromancer who sold his soul to the devil, and extending to the present, this course offers students a chance to explore our enduring fascination with the forbidden. For BA Students: Arts and Letters Sector
Taught by: Richter
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
Notes: All readings and discussions in English.
RELS 239 Death, Disease & Demons in the Medieval World
How did life end for people in the medieval world? For most, death was not considered an end point because the soul journeyed on after the end of the body. But to where did it journey? And how would it be reunited with the body in the future? Between the classical period and the High Middle Ages, death shifted from a moment of quiet release to a frightening struggle in which angels and demons lay in wait for a soul as soon as it exited the body. This course will examine these changing beliefs about dying, focusing primarily on Christian medieval Europe but drawing comparative examples from Judaism, the Roman world, and Byzantine Christianity. Other topics we’ll consider include martyrdom and fears of bodily dismemberment; the emergence of purgatory and depictions of the afterworld; and the development of Christian rites for the dead. We’ll also investigate beliefs about the invisible powers of demons and the apocalyptic end of times. The course will also explore not only the process by which people entered the afterlife in the Middle Ages but also the causes of their deaths—what kinds of disease primarily afflicted medieval society, and how did age, class and gender intersect with disease to affect certain populations? We will end the semester by examining that most apocalyptic of Medieval events— the Black Death—in light of recent scientific discoveries, medieval medical explanations, and social changes brought on by this demographic catastrophe. Students will be exposed to a range of primary sources as well as evidence from tombstone inscriptions, architecture and manuscript illuminations, and archaeology. No prior knowledge of Medieval history is necessary.
Taught by: Leja
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 242 Muslim Sainthood Practices
This course aims at introducing various classical, popular and modern Muslim saints in South Asia. We will read the life stories of these saints and focus on their contribution to various religions in South Asia. We will learn about the major concepts initiated and circulated by these saints and their distinctive ways of dealing with spiritual aspects. While focusing on their sainthood practices, we will also discuss the nature of the dialogue which addresses the questions such as pluralism, localism, and a new paradigm of spirituality that continually interacts with diverse modes of everyday life in South Asia. In order to understand their impact on visual and media cultures, we will also watch two documentaries and compare these visual sources with sainthood literature and practices.
Taught by: Mohammad, M.A.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 244 From Miracles to Mindfulness
In 1902, the most famous philosopher in America, William James, revolutionized the study of religion by analyzing religion as an experience rather than as a set of doctrines or scriptures. In this course, we will pick up the inquiry that James and scholars such as Sigmund Freud began by exploring new approaches to the science and philosophy of religious experience. We will invite a series of experts from a wide range of fields--neuroscience, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, psychology, anthropology, to name only a few--to present their cutting-edged research on the nature of religious experience. How can religious experience be studied? What does the research reveal about religious experience? And what can we learn from such experiences about the workings of the human mind and human society? The course has two components: 1) a discussion-centered mini-seminar from 3:30-5:00 will open consideration of the subject with help from relevant readings 2) a guest lecture series every Tuesday from 5:00-6:30, featuring leading scholars who approach religious experience from different disciplinary angles or in light of different questions.
Taught by: Steve Weitzman
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 245 Sufism
This course is a survey of the large complex of Islamic intellectual and social perspectives subsumed under the term Sufism. Sufi philosophies, beliefs, practices, and social organizations have been a major part of the Islamic tradition in all historical periods and Sufism has also served as a primary muse behind Islamic aesthetic expression in poetry, music, and the visual arts. In this course, we will attempt to understand the nature and importance of Sufism by addressing both the world of ideas and socio-cultural practices. We will trace the development of Sufism as a form of Muslim piety linked to key notions in the Quran as well as living practices of venerating the Prophet Muhammad. We will then immerse ourselves in Sufi theoretical writings through a select list of primary sources introducing foundational Sufi concepts concerning the annihilation of oneself in God, and the various stages of the Sufi quest for spiritual union. From there, we will shift to a discussion of the interactions between Sufism and philosophy by looking at the writings of two of the most influential Sufi thinkers, Al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi. We will also study the important role of Sufi poetry through a close reading of a selection of Rumi’s works. In our discussion of the social and political dimensions of Sufism, we will explore the relations between Sufi movements and religious and political authority, focusing on antinomianism and patronage in the Ottoman Empire, and on Sufi responses to colonial rule. The last part of the course will look at the roles of Sufis and Sufism in contemporary societies from South Asia to North America.
Taught by: Harris
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 246 Spirituality in the Age of Global Warming: Designing a Digital Mapping Project in Scalar
We are living in the midst of one of the most severe crises in the Earth's history. Science confirms the glaciers are melting, hurricanes are growing more intense, and the oceans are rising. But there is also a deeply spiritual dimension to global warming that does not factor into the scientific explanations of the Anthropocene. "Spirituality" will be defined not in terms of one particular religion, but in relationship to a passionate study of the environment and nature. Readings will include materials from both the sciences and the humanities such as Donella Meadows's Thinking in Systems, Elizabeth Kolbert's The Sixth Extinction, Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior, and films such as Black Fish and Wale Rider. The theoretical focus of the course will be how "multispecies partnerships" can help us better understand and mitigate the effects of Climate Change. This class will work collaboratively on a digital archive with an interactive mapping interface designed in Scalar. This newly developed platform allows for the creation of multimedia exhibits that will document how Global Warming is affecting coral reefs in the tropics, glaciers in the Arctic and Antarctic, rainforests in the Amazon and rivers of Philadelphia. Students will also work individually to design interactive maps on the Scalar platform documenting their own more personal interactions with the environment.
Taught by: Timothy Powell
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 248 Introduction to Islamic Law
This course will introduce students to classical Islamic law, the all-embracing sacred law of Islam. Among the world's various legal systems, Islamic law may be the most widely misunderstood and even misrepresented; certainly, misconceptions about it abound. Islamic law is, however, the amazing product of a rich, fascinating and diverse cultural and intellectual tradition. Most of the readings in this course will be taken from primary sources in translation. Areas covered will include criminal law, family law, law in the Quran, gender and sexuality, the modern application of Islamic law, Islamic government and other selected topics.
Taught by: Lowry
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 249 Re-enchanting Modernity: A Guide to Sufism in South Asia
This undergraduate level course introduces students to Sufism in modern South Asia, with a particular focus on how Muslim 'mystics' and their 'mystical' methods interacted with modernity, colonialism, technological developments and globalization. This course is divided into three parts. In the first part of this course, students are provided with an overview of the theological and historical background of the dominant expression of Islam that came to be identified as 'Sufism' of 'Islamic mysticism', the historical development of Sufi institutions and spaces in South Asia, and the historical emergence of South Asia as a prominent global center of Sufism. The second and main part of this course introduces students to a range of anthropological and historical works that are revelatory about how Sufi in modern South Asia were and remain intimately connected to modern political and technological developments. Providing students with an overview of Sufi re-enchantments of modernity from the 19th to 21st century, this section of the course focuses upon Sufi movements and masters who perpetuated or defended customary Islam through sophisticated appropriations of technologies and print networks, and negotiations with non-Muslim rulers and societies. Moreover, students will be introduced to anthropological and historical scholarship on religious worlds in modern South Asia that were and remain steeped in 'customary Islam' and Sufi performances and interpretations of Islam. These sources reveal how 'mystical' methods of performing Islam through ecstasy and spiritual restoration, and interpretations of dreams and visions, have regularly interacted with contemporaneous technologies. The third part of this course introduces students to the globalization of South Asian Sufism in North America, Europe and Southeast Asia. Herein, students will be encouraged to engage with anthropological and literary works pertaining to itinerant South Asian Sufi masters and their devotional cults, and introduced to active South Asian Sufi centers in Philadelphia.
Taught by: Sevea
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 251 History of Hinduism
This course will explore the history of the religion(s) designated by the term 'Hinduism' from their earliest articulations down to the rise of modern reforms in the nineteenth century. The study of Hinduism is perhaps unique among the scholarly traditions on world religions in that it has to date had no serious connected account of its historical development, as scholars have preferred to take structural, sociological, phenomenological, and doctrinal approaches to the religion. The course, after a brief review of scholarly approaches to Hinduism and their interpretive legacies, will seek to develop a historical sense of the religion through attention to shifts in liturgy, ritual, theology, doctrine, sacrificial kingship, and soteriology. The course will include the reading of primary sources relevant to understanding these changes a well as highlight both modern and premodern traditions of their interpretation. It will also consider and assess some of the key interpretive ideas in the study of Hinduism, including, Sanskritization, Great and Little Traditions, cult formation, regional and popular religious movements, and canon formation. There will also be sustained consideration of the question of religion and socio-political power as well as relations between Hinduism and other religions like Buddhism and Islam.
Taught by: Sreenivasan
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
RELS 254 Violence, Tolerance, Freedom
This seminar examines how the adjective "religious" has been used to modify the nouns "violence," "tolerance," and "freedom." It traces the historical development of liberal ideas of tolerance and human rights, interrogates the common assumption that religion exerts a pervasive influence on politics and vice versa, critically examines the concept of terrorism, and connects the neoliberal ideal of unfettered free markets to the idea of being "spiritual but not religious."
Taught by: Jolyon Thomas
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 256 Existential Despair
This is an experimental course that seeks to combine creative pedagogical methods and alternative scheduling to encourage intellectual reflection and emotional vulnerability through an in-depth study of the way people cope with existential despair. Through a reading of memoirs, novels, poetry, and essays in an atmosphere conducive to close-reading and full-participation students will explore a wide-range of ways of coping with, describing, and comprehending moments of great despair. Lectures will explain the ritual, liturgical, homiletic, meditative, reflective, self-destructive, psycho-somatic, and ascetic ways despair is both conditioned and mitigated by different thinkers from various traditions over time. Format: This course is different from most others in that there is no homework, no class participation, no outside reading, and no research papers. There will be no work given to students or expected of them outside of class. All work is done in class and class is very long (8 hours straight, once a week, from four PM to midnight). Students will eat together in class, there will be three bathroom breaks, but there will be no internet, no phones, no computers, and no auditors. Each student must be fully committed to the class and 75% of the grade will be determined by class participation.
Taught by: McDaniel
Prerequisite: Permission needed from instructor
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 259 Ultimate Meanings
Does life have some ultimate meaning? In their search for an answer to this question, people tell stories—stories about the creation of the world, about great human beings confronted with the mysteries of existence, about what happens to people after death. To explore the role of stories in finding meaning in life, we will focus on some of the most meaningful stories ever composed: the biblical stories of Adam and Eve, Abraham and his family, the Exodus, Job and his friends, and the life and death of Jesus. One of our goals is to try to retrieve the original meaning of these narratives, what their authors intended, but we will also explore what they have come to mean for readers in our own day for believers and skeptics, scientists and artists, fundamentalists and feminists.
For BA Students: Arts and Letters Sector
Taught by: Weitzman
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 267 Food & Religion
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 265 Food & Religion
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 267 Food & Religion
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 295 Women in Modern S. Asia
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 270 Topics in East Asian Religions
This course examines the relationship between religious institutions and the state in East Asia. Focusing on China and Japan, we will learn about the impact of religious ideas, practices, and organizations on social, political and economic processes and inspect the role of religion in the consolidation of individual, communal, and national identity. Adopting a comparative and transnational approach, we will examine the impact of Asian religious traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Shinto, as well as global religions such as Islam and Christianity, on the states and their role in shaping power relations on the international level.
Taught by: Tavor
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 271 The Politics of Shinto
Shinto-derived images and ideas frequently appear in Japanese anime and film, and journalists and academics frequently mobilize the term Shinto as a way of explaining Japan's past or envisioning its future. The environmentalist left champions a green Shinto while Shinto-derived ideas serve as red meat for politicians pandering to Japan's nationalist right. While the influential position Shinto occupies in Japanese sociopolitical life is therefore clear, the term Shinto itself is actually not. Depending on who one asks, Shinto is either the venerable indigenous religion of the Japanese archipelago, the irreducible core of Japanese culture, a tiny subset of Japanese Buddhism, an environmentalist ethic, or some combination of these. This course investigates the multifarious types of Shinto envisioned by these competing interest groups.
Taught by: Jolyon Thomas
Course not offered every year
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 273 Buddhist Literature
This course seeks to introduce students to the diversity of texts, textual practices, and textual communities in Buddhist Asia. We will look at cosmological, historical, narrative, psychological, grammatical, magical, didactic, and astrological genres to gain an understanding of how Buddhist writers from various places and times have expressed their views on the inner workings of the mind, the nature of action, the illusion of phenomena, the role of the ethical agent, the origin of chaos, the persistence of violence, the contours of the universe, and the way to Enlightenment.
Taught by: McDaniel
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 275 Women in Modern S. Asia
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit
We imagine ancient Greece and Rome as the cradles of democracy and republicanism, the early J uda as pious theocracy, but the evidence tells us that monarchy was the most common and prevalent form of government in antiquity (and the premodern world in general). Despite their ubiquity, the King was a polarizing figure— in reality and in conception. On the one hand, some idealized the monarchy as the ideal leader, and monarchy provided the language with which to describe and even imagine the very gods— but on the other, monarchs were widely reviled in both theory and practice, from the Greek tyrant to the biblical Saul. The Emperor Augustus loudly denied his own affinity to the office of “king,” even as he ruled alone and was revered as a god. In other words, kings stood for both the ideal ruler and the worst form of government. This class confronts the paradox of the King. This class will take a special look at the idea and institution of kingship in the Near East, among the Jews, Greeks, and Romans to assess and discuss similarities, differences, and mutual influences among these cultures. Through the lens of the “king” we will explore the idea of god, government, human frailty, and utopianism. Why did the rule of one prevail, why was it so attractive to so many? How was the royal rule legitimized? What role did religious beliefs play for keeping a monarchical system stable? What did people expect from their rulers and what happened if the ruler failed to fulfill these expectations? How was the concept of monarchical rule adopted and transferred into other spheres, such as religious belief systems or hopes for messianic kingship? While kingship is a rich field of scholarly inquiry, the question of its ubiquity, and the entanglement and divergences of these three cultures is rarely studied in context and comparison.

Taught by: Wilker, Dohrmann
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 309 Honors Thesis Seminar
Required of honors majors who choose the research option.
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Independent Study
1 Course Unit

RELS 311 Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East: Historical Perspectives
A reading- and discussion-intensive seminar that addresses several recurring questions with regard to the Middle East and North Africa. How have Islam, Judaism, and Christianity influenced each other in these regions historically? How have Jews, Christians, and Muslims fared as religious minorities? To what extent have communal relations been characterized by harmony and cooperation, or by strife and discord, and how have these relations changed in different contexts over time? To what extent and under what circumstances have members of these communities converted, intermarried, formed business alliances, and adopted or developed similar customs? How has the emergence of the modern nation-state system affected communal relations as well as the legal or social status of religious minorities in particular countries? How important has religion been as one variable in social identity (along with sect, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.), and to what extent has religious identity figured into regional conflicts and wars? The focus of the class will be on the modern period (c. 1800-present) although we will read about some relevant trends in the early and middle Islamic periods as well. Students will also pursue individually tailored research to produce final papers. Prior background in Islamic studies and Middle Eastern History is required. This class is intended for juniors, seniors, and graduate students.

Taught by: Sharkey
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 320 Modern Jewish Intellectual and Cultural History
An overview of Jewish intellectual and cultural history from the late 18th century until the present. The course considers the Jewish enlightenment Reform, Conservative and Neo-Orthodox Judaism, Zionist and Jewish Socialist thought, and Jewish thought in the 20th century, particularly in the context of the Holocaust. Readings of primary sources including Mendelsohn, Geiger, Hirsch, Herzl, Achad-ha-Am, Baec k, Buber, Kaplan, and others. No previous background is required.

Taught by: Ruderman
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
3 Course Units

RELS 329 Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible
What does God want from us? Why are we here? How can we make the most of our existence? In this course we will explore how the Bible answers above questions and what this can tell us about the human condition during biblical times. Students will read select passages in the Book of Proverbs, Job and Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) in conjunction with Near Eastern texts. We will learn how ancient sages faced the uncertainties of life and the fleeting nature of human existence.

Taught by: Crantz
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 352 Jewish Political Thought & Action
Weekly seminar explores expressions of Jewish political thought—and, where possible, political action—from biblical times to the present. Themes include the leadership of biblical priests, prophets and kings; covenant as the basis of the theocratic polity the status of outsiders in biblical and rabbinic societies; constructions of political authority; changing understandings of Jewish "nationhood"; messianism; medieval Jewish ruminations on ideal government; the non-sovereign Jewish community's relationship to rulers; manifestations of Jewish communal autonomy; tensions between rabbinic and lay leadership; biblical Israel as a model for governance in early modern political thought; debates over Jewish Emancipation; expressions of Jewish socialism; varieties of pre-state Zionist thought; contemporary messianic Zionism; contemporary manifestations of Jewish political concerns. Primary sources (English translation) include readings from Hebrew Bible, ancient rabbinic texts, Jewish communal decrees, Moses Maimonides and other medieval Jewish thinkers; Baruch Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Ber Barochov, Theodor Herzl, Martin Buber, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Yeshayahu Leibovitz and contemporary writers. One session will take place in the Rare Book Room of Van Pelt Library. No prior knowledge is assumed.
Taught by: Fishman
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 356 Living Deliberately: Monks, Saints, and the Contemplative Life
Students who are not Religious Studies Majors and are not honors students must gain permission from instructor to enroll in this course. This is an experimental course in which students will experience monastic and ascetic ways of living. There will be no examinations, no formal papers, and very little required reading. However, each participant will need to be fully committed intellectually and participate in the monastic rules in the course involving restrictions on dress, technology, verbal communication, and food. The course subject matter is about ways in which nuns, monks, shamans, and swamis in various religious traditions (Buddhist, Muslim, Catholic, Jain, Taoist, Hindu, Animist, among others) have used poetry, meditation, mind-altering chemicals, exercise, magic, and self-torture to cope with pain and suffering, as well as struggle with spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical questions concerning the nature of the soul, the afterlife, and reality. Through monastic and spiritual practice, this course hopes to provide students with an opportunity to struggle with these questions themselves.
Taught by: McDaniel
Course not offered every year
Prerequisites: Students must complete an interview with instructor before acquiring a permit.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 399 Directed Reading
Students arrange with a faculty member to pursue a program of reading and writing on a suitable topic.
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Independent Study
1 Course Unit

RELS 401 Sacred Stuff in Medieval & Early Modern Europe
During devotional activities people engage with various objects and believe that they are imbued with religious significance. In this seminar, we will explore the material culture of religion across medieval and early modern Europe. From rosary beads and crucifixes to devotional books, prints, and paintings, a range of "sacred stuff" populated the lives of medieval and early modern Europeans. We will consider objects associated with daily life as well as rites of passage. We will study objects of Christian devotion and will consider how the advent of Protestantism and the Catholic Reformation influenced the types of objects devotees used for their devotion. In this seminar, we will discuss the material culture of Judaism and Islam, religions also practiced in medieval and early modern Europe. We will engage with "sacred stuff" from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including art history, literature, archaeology, social history, and cultural history. We will then hone these skills with visits to local museums and libraries where we will view medieval and early modern books, objects and images. Course assignments will include an in-depth analysis of a devotional object from medieval or early modern Europe chosen by the student.
Taught by: Tycz
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 402 Jewish Political Thought & Action
Weekly seminar explores expressions of Jewish political thought—and, where possible, political action—from biblical times to the present. Themes include the leadership of biblical priests, prophets and kings; covenant as the basis of the theocratic polity the status of outsiders in biblical and rabbinic societies; constructions of political authority; changing understandings of Jewish "nationhood"; messianism; medieval Jewish ruminations on ideal government; the non-sovereign Jewish community's relationship to rulers; manifestations of Jewish communal autonomy; tensions between rabbinic and lay leadership; biblical Israel as a model for governance in early modern political thought; debates over Jewish Emancipation; expressions of Jewish socialism; varieties of pre-state Zionist thought; contemporary messianic Zionism; contemporary manifestations of Jewish political concerns. Primary sources (English translation) include readings from Hebrew Bible, ancient rabbinic texts, Jewish communal decrees, Moses Maimonides and other medieval Jewish thinkers; Baruch Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Ber Barochov, Theodor Herzl, Martin Buber, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Yeshayahu Leibovitz and contemporary writers. One session will take place in the Rare Book Room of Van Pelt Library. No prior knowledge is assumed.
Taught by: Fishman
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 410 American Religion and the LGBTQ Experience
Taught by: Philip Francis
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 422 Jewish Intellectual and Cultural History in the Early Modern Era: From the Spanish Expulsion to Spinoza
God and Nature examines the place of the natural world, medicine, and science in Jewish thought from antiquity to the modern era. It looks especially at a body of primary sources in Hebrew written during the age of the so-called "scientifuc revolution" and during its aftermath. The course is a seminar open to undergraduate and graduate students with a reading knowledge of classical Hebrew. Students without Hebrew with special interest in the subject might enroll with special permission from the instructor.
Taught by: Ruderman
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 426 Rabbinic Writers on Rabbinic Culture
The course traces reflections on rabbinic culture produced within Jewish legal literature of the classic rabbinic period - Midrash, Mishna and Talmud - and in later juridical genres - talmudic commentary, codes and responsa. Attention will be paid to the mechanics of different genres, the role played by the underlying prooftext, the inclusion or exclusion of variant opinions, the presence of non-legal information, the balance between precedent and innovation. Reading knowledge of Hebrew is required.
Taught by: Fishman
Course not offered every year
Prerequisite: Reading knowledge of Hebrew
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 429 Topics In Jewish History
Reading and discussion course on selected topics in Jewish history. Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 434 Christian Thought From 1000-1800
This course will trace the development of Christian thought (including philosophy, theology, spirituality and mysticism) from the early Scholastic period to early Methodism. Readings will be from both primary and secondary sources. A research paper will be required of each student. Spring 2014: This course will give an overview of the main currents of Western Christian thought from the first age of reform (that is, the Central Middle Ages) through the Reformation of the sixteenth century, to the eve of the Enlightenment. In these centuries, “Christendom” underwent an almost constant process of internal and external self-definition. The most striking results of this process were the definitive separation of eastern and western Christianity and the division of the western church into what became known as Protestant and Catholic Christianity. Our focus will be on the changing definitions of Christian culture, including theological formulations (definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy), trends of spirituality and mysticism, forms of worship, and gender roles and definitions. Attention will also be given to institutional questions such as ecclesiastical hierarchy, monasticism, scholasticism and the rise of universities, and the changing relationship between the secular and religious worlds. Readings will be from both original and secondary sources. Additional primary sources will be available online, attached to the course Blackboard page. I will supply copies of other readings.
Taught by: Matter
Course not offered every year
Prerequisites: None-some background in European history helpful.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 438 Topics in Medieval History
This seminar introduces students to the development of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation by focusing on ancient, medieval, and modern interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is part of the Gospel of Matthew and is often considered to summarize the essential teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Students will encounter a variety of important interpreters (including Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Leo Tolstoy, Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Clarence Jordan, and Hans Dieter Betz), guided by appropriate secondary materials. The seminar will utilize a combination of lecture, discussion, student presentations, reports, close reading, and a research paper. Students will be encouraged to do original research in the primary sources. This course has no prerequisites. The readings will be made available in English. The class will utilize a combination of lecture, discussion, student presentations, reports, close reading, and a research paper.
Taught by: Treat
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 439 Religion, Social Justice & Urban Development
Urban development has been influenced by religious conceptions of social and economic justice. Progressive traditions within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Bahá’í, Humanism and other religions and systems of moral thought have yielded powerful critiques of oppression and hierarchy as well as alternative economic frameworks for ownership, governance, production, labor, and community. Historical and contemporary case studies from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East will be considered, as we examine the ways in which religious responses to poverty, inequality, and ecological destruction have generated new forms of resistance and development.
Taught by: Lamas
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 440 Later Islamic Art & Architecture
Istanbul, Samarkand, Isfahan, Cairo and Delhi as major centers of art production in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. Attention is given to urban and architectural achievement as well as to the key monuments of painting and metalwork. The visual environment of the “gunpowder empires” is discussed.
Taught by: Holod
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 464 Digital Humanities
Penn recently opened the Price Lab for Digital Humanities as part of the university’s new strategic plan, so it is a very exciting moment for DH at Penn. This class might be considered an advanced introduction to the relatively short history of DH. It will focus on one of the questions that has vexed the field from the beginning: Why are the Digital Humanities So White? As Tara McPherson put it rather bluntly in a chapter of Debates in the Digital Humanities. The class will provide an overview of some of the foundational texts of DH, but the primary focus of the class will be involving students in a new DH project to construct an interactive timeline, built in Omeka. The spatio-temporal timeline seeks to represent Iroquois history as seen from the perspective of Iroquois scholar and Faithkeeper, Richard Hill. Hill is the director of the Deyohahage: Indigenous Knowledge Centre on the Six Nations reserve in the Grand River region of Ontario and one of the most highly regarded traditional knowledge keepers of his generation, so it is a great honor to be able to work with him. On a more theoretical level, the class will be addressing the relationship between cultural codes and digital codes. In other words, how to represent Iroquois spiritual history (i.e., mythical events) on a chronological timeline? How to represent indigenous space on maps created by the people who colonized the Iroquois (e.g., the border between Canada and the US cuts the Iroquois traditional homeland in half)? Students will learn how to evaluate a complex and challenging project like this, which is still in its earliest stages. On a more practical level, students will learn skills in the exhibit building software Omeka. The class will engage many different forms of history from archival documents to YouTube videos, in its study of how digital technology makes it possible to represent the indigenous oral tradition much more accurately than is possible on the printed page.
Taught by: Tim Powell
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 471 Religion in Eleven Objects
This advanced course for Religious Studies majors and minors approaches the study of religion through material objects. By looking at both sacred and everyday objects like rosaries melted in atomic blasts, magical amulets used in healing rituals, temple murals defaced by invading armies, manuscript stained by hold water, we will explore the many ways people express their spiritual aspirations and existential fears through objects. Not only will a different object from a variety of religious traditions be examined each week (eleven in total), but we will also explore different methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of religion. Psychological, phenomenological, bio-genetic, sociological, art historical, discursive, post-modern, and narrative approaches will be discussed.
Taught by: Justin McDaniel
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 498 Advanced Research Project: Human Flourishing and Religious Education
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Independent Study
1 Course Unit

RELS 501 Topics in the Study of Religion
This course deals with various religious topics, such as Mass Religious Conversion.
Taught by: Klausner
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 505 Religion & Cinema
This course looks at religion in film. As we will see, this is not just a question of how religion is represented onscreen, but how cinematic objects make religious subjects. We'll explore the ways films are crafted through technique, performance, and distribution, then consider how these components shape religious bodies and religious traditions in turn.
Taught by: Schaefer
Course usually offered in spring term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 509 Teaching Religious Studies
Many faculty in academia, especially at a research university, think of themselves as scholars first and teachers second. The emphasis on scholarship is essential for a position at a research university, but what the culture of such institutions can obscure is the importance of teaching as part of the academic vocation. The purpose of this course is to help prepare graduate students to teach academic religious studies, not to teach them how to teach, a skill developed through experience and feedback, but to encourage students to plan in advance for their work as educators and to develop their teaching aspirations and approach in dialogue with issues and debates in Religious Studies, the Humanities and the field of Education.
Taught by: Weitzman
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 510 Civil Religion
In the first half of the course, we will examine the theoretical question of whether modern liberal societies need a civil religion — an idea first proposed in the late eighteenth century by writer who feared that without some unifying ideal or principle the centrifugal forces at work in modern societies would lead them to disintegrate. We will examine various authors who have defended the idea of civil religion in these terms (including J.J. Rousseau, J.G. Herder, and G.W.F. Hegel) as well as several who (implicitly or explicitly) have rejected the argument (Max Weber, Michael Oakeshott, Daniel Bell, and Niklas Luhmann). In the second half of the class, we will turn to the American context and explore the way these arguments have played themselves out from the time of the constitutional frames to today. In this part of the class, we will read and discuss excerpts from the Federalist Papers and Tocqueville's Democracy in America, selected presidential speeches, nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates surrounding Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism, John Dewey/Richard Rorty's proposal for a religion of democratic "common faith," and the neoconservative case for a civil religion of "national greatness." Along the way we will also have occasion to examine sociological treatments of civil religion by such authors as Emile Durkheim, Robert Bellah, and Seymour Martin Lipset.
Taught by: Butler
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 517 Topics in American Religion
From Marvin Gaye, to Tammy Faye Baker, to Sarah Palin and James Baldwin, Pentecostalism has influenced many, including politicians, preachers, writers, and the media. One of the fastest growing religious movements in the world, Pentecostalism continues to have a profound effect on the religious landscape. Pentecostalism's unique blend of charismatic worship, religious practices, and flamboyant, media-savvy leadership, has drawn millions into this understudies and often controversial religious movement. This course will chronicle the inception and growth of Pentecostalism in the United States, giving particular attention to beliefs, practices, gender, ethnicity, and Global Pentecostalism.
Taught by: Butler
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 520 Spirit and Law
While accepting "the yoke of the commandments", Jewish thinkers from antiquity onward have perennially sought to make the teachings of revelation more meaningful in their own lives. Additional impetus for this quest has come from overtly polemical challenges to the law, such as those leveled by Paul, medieval Aristotelians, Spinoza and Kant. This course explores both the critiques of Jewish Law, and Jewish reflections on the Law's meaning and purpose, by examining a range of primary sources within their intellectual and historical contexts. Texts (in English translation) include selections from Midrash, Talmud, medieval Jewish philosophy and biblical exegesis, kabbalah, Hasidic homilies, Jewish responses to the Enlightenment, and contemporary attempts to re-value and invent Jewish rituals.
Taught by: Fishman
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 523 Studies in Medieval Jewish Culture
Course examines features of 9th-16th century Jewish culture within their broader historical, regional and cross-cultural contexts, whether Christian or Islamic. Emphasis is placed on primary sources in Hebrew. Topics vary and have included "Reconstructing Rabbinic Judaism prior to the First Millenium"; "Custom Medieval Jewish Cultures"; "Jewish Culture in the Islamicate World"; "Nature in Medieval Jewish Culture." Students should be able to read unpointed Hebrew. May be repeated for credit.
Taught by: Fishman
One-term course offered either term
Prerequisites: Reading knowledge of Hebrew.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 537 Medieval Christian Mysticism
The course traces the flowering visionaries (mostly women) in Italy between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. We will pay close attention to the writings of some of the more famous women, notably Claire of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Lucia Brocadelli, (all of whom can be read in English as well as in the original) and contextualize them with secondary sources about gender roles and the aspects of "female Christianity," especially connected to the materiality of women in pre-modern Italy (Bynum, McGinn, Zarru, etc.).
We will meet in the library to take advantage of the manuscript and early book holdings that Penn has to offer.
Taught by: Matter
One-term course offered either term
Prerequisite: undergraduates need permission from instructor
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 540 David and Solomon
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 541 Religion and the Visual Image: Seeing is Believing
Seeing is Believing engages in a historical, theoretical, and cross-cultural analysis of the place of visuality in religion and of religion in visual culture. We will examine images, buildings, places, objects, performances and events. The geographical, cultural and historical scope of the material is broad, including subjects from Europe, the Islamic World, non-Muslim South Asia, the US and Latin America from the medieval period until the present. Theoretical works will be read in conjunction with representative examples to invite intellectual engagement in a socially and historically grounded way. Important issues to be covered include the relationship of visual to material culture; visual theories versus theories of vision; locating religion in human sensory experience; perception at individual and collective levels; authentics, fakes and simulacra; iconoclasm and image veneration; aesthetics, use and utility; and things.
Taught by: Jamal Elias
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 551 History of Hinduism
This course will explore the history of the religion(s) designated by the term 'Hinduism' from their earliest articulations down to the rise of modern reforms in the nineteenth century. The study of Hinduism is perhaps unique among the scholarly traditions on world religions in that it has to date had no serious connected account of its historical development, as scholars have preferred to take structural, sociological, phenomenological, and doctrinal approaches to the religion. The course, after a brief review of scholarly approaches to Hinduism and their interpretive legacies, will seek to develop a historical sense of the religion through attention to shifts in liturgy, ritual, theology, doctrine, sacrality, kingship, and soteriology. The course will include the reading of primary sources relevant to understanding these changes a well as highlight both modern and premodern traditions of their interpretation. It will also consider and assess some of the key interpretive ideas in the study of Hinduism, including, Sanskritization, Great and Little Traditions, cult formation, regional and popular religious movements, and canon formation. There will also be sustained consideration of the question of religion and socio-political power as well as relations between Hinduism and other religions like Buddhism and Islam.
Taught by: Ali
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 552 Emotion and Power
Is power smart? Conventional models of power— both in everyday, commonsense understandings and in academic studies— tend to be instrumentalist. They understand power as a thoughtful exercise designed to achieve particular ends. But as we consider the political-cultural landscape, does the assumption that power is rational hold up? This seminar will bring together an in-depth exploration of Michel Foucault’s theory of power with contemporary affect theory to address this question. We will begin by mapping out Foucault’s “analytics of power,” from his early work on power knowledge to his late work on embodiment, desire, and the care of the self. We will then consider a series of interpretations of Foucault within contemporary affect theory, an approach which centralizes the non-rational, emotive force of power. Along the way, we will consider formations of sex, race, religion, material culture, and cinema. No previous knowledge of theory is required.
Students will be encouraged to connect the theoretical frames of the class to their own fields and areas of interest.
Taught by: Schaefer
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 554 Religion and the Visual Image: Seeing is Believing
Seeing is Believing engages in a historical, theoretical, and cross-cultural analysis of the place of visuality in religion and of religion in visual culture. We will examine images, buildings, places, objects, performances and events. The geographical, cultural and historical scope of the material is broad, including subjects from Europe, the Islamic World, non-Muslim South Asia, the US and Latin America from the medieval period until the present. Theoretical works will be read in conjunction with representative examples to invite intellectual engagement in a socially and historically grounded way. Important issues to be covered include the relationship of visual to material culture; visual theories versus theories of vision; locating religion in human sensory experience; perception at individual and collective levels; authentics, fakes and simulacra; iconoclasm and image veneration; aesthetics, use and utility; and things.
Taught by: Jamal Elias
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 557 Seminar in Rabbinic Judaism
Most of the foundational writings of rabbinic Judaism corpora of Midrash, Mishna, and the two Talmuds were in existence by the end of the sixth century CE. Yet, for several centuries thereafter, there is little evidence attesting to the lived nature of rabbinic culture and society.
The course will focus on writings by Jews and about Jews, produced between the 7th and 10th centuries, complemented by secondary sources. Texts will include selections from archaeological inscriptions; Midrash; liturgical poetry; Targum; Masora; geonic responsa, writings by Muslims and by Church Fathers. While students must be able to read Hebrew, much class time will be devoted to the improvement of reading and comprehension skills. Undergraduates should seek permission of the instructor.
Taught by: Stern, Reed
Course not offered every year
Prerequisites: Proficiency in Hebrew and/or Greek recommended.
Undergraduates need permission to enroll.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
Notes: May be repeated for credit.

RELS 571 Advanced Topics in Buddhism
This is an advanced course for upper level undergraduates and graduate students on various issues in the study of Buddhist texts, art, and history. Each semester the theme of the course changes. In recent years themes have included: Magic and Ritual, Art and Material Culture, Texts and Contexts, Manuscript Studies. Fall 2013 Topic: Buddhist repertoires (idiosyncratic and personal assemblages of beliefs, reflections, wonderings, possessions, and practices) for a large part, material and sensual. Buddhists are often sustained by their collection, production, and trading of stuff amulets, images, posters, protective drawings, CDs, calendars, films, comic books, and even Buddhist-themed pillow cases, umbrellas, and coffee mugs. Aspirations are interconnected with objects. Beliefs are articulated through objects. Objects are not empty signifiers onto which meaning is placed. The followers and the objects, the collectors and their stuff, are overlooked in the study of religion, even in many studies in the growing field of material culture and religion. What is striking is that these objects of everyday religiosity are often overlooked by art historians as well. Art historians often remove (through photography or physical movement to museums or shops) images and ritual implements from their ritual context and are seen as objets d’art.
Taught by: McDaniel
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 581 Environmental Activism & Digital Humanities
We are living in a moment of Environmental crisis as the oceans rise and carbon emissions warm the planet. And yet more than half the US population believes climate change will not harm them personally and 30% feel they cannot trust science. As the standoff at Standing Rock and the #NoDapl movement made clear, Native Americans’ spirituality is playing a central role in galvanizing the public and providing alternative narratives to capitalist consumption. Students will work on ongoing projects to build partnerships between Penn and two Native American communities– Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in South Dakota and a UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination submitted by Ojibwe First Nations in Canada to preserve 24,000 sq. kms. of boreal forest through the use of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. This class will learn to build multi-media exhibits using Scalar, Omeka, Google Earth, and StoryMap. No previous experience is necessary. Students will learn about choosing a platform, creating dynamic narratives that incorporate videos and interactive features, and learning about grant writing in order to sustain digital projects and benefit Indigenous communities. Although the emphasis will be on practical applications or praxis, the course will also engage with new theories from the fields of Digital Humanities and Environmental Humanities as a basis for building new exhibits.
Taught by: Powell
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 586 History of Islam in Asia
This class is designed to structure reflection on Islam and Islamic culture in South Asia– Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Contrary to the popular perception that the Middle East defines Islam, Asian countries not only host the most Muslims in the world but have been the source of some of Islam’s most important social and reform movements in the last three hundred years. This class looks at the history of Muslim societies across Asia not just as a religious community but also as a social and cultural bloc (a distinctive part of what Marshall Hodgson called the ‘Islamicate’ world, but also an area that challenges some of Hodgson’s assumptions about the Islamicate world). This course allows for the study of the Muslim world between the years 1700 to present. The class will allow students to compare and contrast Muslim societies over the last three centuries, examine points of confluence for geographically- or culturally- distinct Muslim peoples in the last three centuries, and in their writing assignments focus on the history of one society in a wider Islamicate context. In the process students will gain a more nuanced awareness of how Islam has made an impact in Asian countries, and how Asian countries have in turn impacted Islam.
Taught by: Robb
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 617 Proseminar in Africana Studies
This course focuses on the historical and cultural relationship between Africans and their descendants abroad.
Taught by: Beavers, Butler, Charles, Jackson, Savage, Thomas, Zuberi
Two terms. student must enter first term.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 620 Godliness, Miracles, Madness
This graduate-level course introduces students to religious worlds within port cities of the modern Indian Ocean that were centered upon peripatetic Muslim, Saiva, Christian and Sikh miracle-workers, missionaries and ‘gods.’ This course will particularly consider how extant, published sources reveal how religion in the 19th and 20th century cosmopolitan port cities and islands: was centered upon holy men and women or spiritual beings, and intricately connected to modern economic, political and technological developments in the Indian Ocean. This course is divided into three parts. In the first part of this course, students will be introduced, on the one hand, to the scholarship on port cities or islands of, and religions or religious networks in, the modern Indian Ocean. On the other hand, to anthropological, historical and literary works on Muslim saints, Christian missionaries and Saiva gods in the Indian Ocean. In the second and main section of this course, students will be introduced to contemporary academic literature pertaining to the inter-linkages between itinerant miracle-workers, missionaries, ‘gods’ and devotional cults, and economic, political and technological developments in the Indian Ocean. As well as works that explore European institutions, barracks, plantations, cells and asylums, and the steam travel being steeped, in customary religion, carnivals, ecstasy, madness and miracle stories. Here, students will be encouraged to consider ways in which a study of religion and religious economies of modern Indian Ocean port cities can be recovered through extracts from a range of anthropological, literary and historical sources. In the third part of this course, students will be encouraged to engage with the question of whether the religion of devotional cults, preoccupied with the powers of Muslim, Saiva, Christian, and Sikh miracle-workers, missionaries and ‘gods’ in cosmopolitan port cities, was a distinct product of circulations within the Indian Ocean.
Taught by: Sevea
Course usually offered in fall term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 630 Gender and Religion in China
This course examines gender in Chinese religious culture from ancient to contemporary times. We will explore topics including the Buddhist accommodation of Chinese family system, Chinese transformation of the bodhisattva Guanyin, female dieties in Daoist and popular religious pantheons, writings about religious women, female ghosts and fox spirits in literary imagination and folk tales, and the significance of yin force in Chinese medicine and Daoist alchemy. Through the case of China, we will look at how gender plays critical and constitutive roles in religious traditions, and how religion can be used both to reinforce and to challenge gender norms.
Taught by: Cheng, H
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 670 Religious Bodies and Sex in South Asia
This graduate-level course introduces students to the writings of key religious scholars in modern South Asia who associated the regeneration of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism with the cultivation of bodies and sexual practices. Particular attention will be paid towards religious texts produced in modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh pertaining to sexual bodies, exercises and health; celibacy; body-building; the transmission of sexual knowledge; and the political roles of the ‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘Sikh’ body. In this course, students will be encouraged to engage a range of sources including religio-sexual manuals, autobiographies, novels, speeches, pamphlets, official records, recipes and films. Moreover, students will be introduced to the academic literature on South Asian religious scholars and ‘sex gurus’ in South and Southeast Asia; religious sexuality in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe; and, the transcultural literary networks that led to the production of religio-sexual texts in modern South Asia.
Taught by: Sevea
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 632 Hinduism & Colonial Modernity: Hinduism and Colonial Modernity
This seminar deals with the question of modernity in South Asia, with a specific focus on the construction, dissemination, and politicization of Hinduism in nineteenth and twentieth century India. It focuses on three central heuristic lenses--namely those of European imperialism, Orientalism, and nationalism--to study modernity and its discontents. What was at stake in the encounter between colonial modernity and India's religions in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How did colonial and native discourses on "reform" and "revival" shape Indian religions as we understand them today? How is modern "Hinduism" inextricably hinged to early forms of cultural transnationalism, Orientalism, and incipient forms of nationalism? This seminar approaches questions such as these and others, with an eye to understanding how nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses continue to shape contemporary understandings of Hinduism in deep and highly politicized ways.
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 643 The Persian Intellectual Tradition
What makes Persian culture distinctive within broader Islamic intellectual history, and what constitutes the historical and geographical boundary of the Persianate intellectual and cultural zone? These questions lie at the center of inquiry in this seminar in which participants will read and discuss a broad range of works from the 11th to the 20th centuries. Readings will include works on philosophy and language, Sufi epic poems, religious and cultural geographies, accounts of natural and manufactured wonders, urban and political histories, as well as other kinds of texts. All readings will be in English for the regular meeting of the seminar; students with a reading knowledge of Persian and an interest in participating in an additional meeting to read the assignments in their original language should register for the higher of the two numbers listed for this course.
Taught by: Elias
Course not offered every year
Prerequisite: prior knowledge of Persian is required
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 670 Religious Bodies and Sex in South Asia
This graduate-level course introduces students to the writings of key religious scholars in modern South Asia who associated the regeneration of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism with the cultivation of bodies and sexual practices. Particular attention will be paid towards religious texts produced in modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh pertaining to sexual bodies, exercises and health; celibacy; body-building; the transmission of sexual knowledge; and the political roles of the ‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘Sikh’ body. In this course, students will be encouraged to engage a range of sources including religio-sexual manuals, autobiographies, novels, speeches, pamphlets, official records, recipes and films. Moreover, students will be introduced to the academic literature on South Asian religious scholars and ‘sex gurus’ in South and Southeast Asia; religious sexuality in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe; and, the transcultural literary networks that led to the production of religio-sexual texts in modern South Asia.
Taught by: Sevea
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit
RELS 701 Readings in African American Religion History
Traditional narratives of African American Religion go from slavery to civil rights to "freedom" without taking into account the complex religious lives and intellectual production of people of African descent in the Americas. This course will focus on African American Religion and the historical and theoretical frameworks that have shaped the study of this field. Readings will cover religious studies, anthropology, history, and African American studies in order to provide an understanding of the varieties of religion and religious experiences with this particular segment of the African Diaspora.
Taught by: Butler
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 702 Topics in Medieval Art
Spring 2017: For the Christians of Middle Europe, pilgrimages were one of the key embodied experiences of faith. Reliquaries, churches with their welcoming portals, manuscripts and music: all were crafted to augment the corporeal experience of the divine. This seminar will take the material culture surrounding the relic and its veneration as a lens for exploring the Middle Ages, from the Early Christian to the High Gothic. Cross-disciplinary methodologies and cross-cultural examples will be considered to advance our understanding of these phenomena. While proceeding chronologically, each week will focus on a distinct strategy for shaping the interaction between faith and matter.
Taught by: Guerin
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 738 The Long Reformation in Britain and America
This seminar will explore how protestantism infiltrated and shaped the British Isles and colonies at multiple levels, and in particular how it was imposed from above, received in the pew, and negotiated across the gap between the two. We shall examine this process during the century and a half following the official Reformations in England, Scotland, Anglo-Ireland, the Gaidhealtachd, and British settlements in North America. Readings will be for the most part recent (and some classic) historical monographs, with a sampling of primary sources including spiritual autobiographies, diaries, church court records, and sermons. Depending on student interest, readings in anthropology of religion and ritual may be added. The course will begin with readings in secondary literature, then turn to primary research. Each participant will produce a short work (ca. 12 pp. - the length of a conference paper) of original research in primary materials. An introduction to paleography will allow you to use scanned or microfilmed manuscript sources as well as early printed works. We meet in a library seminar room in order to incorporate the material history of the early modern religious text (manuscript and print) and print image as well, with the help of our rare books and manuscripts curators.
Taught by: Todd
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 742 Qur'anic Studies
This seminar explores the nature and uses of the Qur'an. It focuses on the practice and theory of Qur'an commentary and interpretation (safsir and ta'wil). A major portion of the course will involve a close examination of manuscripts of the Qur'an at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Kislak Center at the University of Pennsylvania, concentrating on the relationship between the text and marginalia as well as on the peculiarities of individual manuscripts. The rest of the course will center around reading commentaries on the Qur'an in manuscript as well as print. In addition, we will read and discuss theoretical works on the history and nature of Qur'an commentary, literary criticism and textual analysis, and spend some of the later section of the course discussing issues of translation and editorial processes involved in popularizing Qur'an commentaries on the internet. READING KNOWLEDGE OF ARABIC REQUIRED.
Taught by: Elias
Course not offered every year
Prerequisites: A reading knowledge Arabic required.
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 745 Visual Cultures in Islam
Activity: Lecture
1 Course Unit

RELS 771 Readings Pali Buddhism
This course is an intensive reading course in Pali literature from South and Southeast Asia. Students who wish to take the course must have at least 3 years of Sanskrit and a knowledge of at least one Southeast Asian language. Reading will be in philosophical, narrative, magical, medical, historical, and ritual texts.
Taught by: Justin McDaniel
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 773 Southeast Asian Manuscript Traditions
This is an advanced PhD seminar in which the students will need advanced proficiency in Pali and at least one Southeast Asian Language (Burmese, Thai, Khmer, Lao, Leu, Khoen, Shan, and/or Lanna). Original manuscripts from Penn's collection of Southeast Asian religious, medical, botanical, historical, art, and literary archives will be examined and discussed.
Taught by: McDaniel
Course not offered every year
Activity: Seminar
1 Course Unit

RELS 999 Independent Study
One-term course offered either term
Activity: Independent Study
1 Course Unit
Notes: See department for section numbers.