Department of Religion
Vassar College

THE MAJORS’ HANDBOOK

Academic Year 2015-16

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I. ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

The concentration in religion provides an understanding of major religious traditions, an exposure to a variety of approaches employed within the study of religion, and an opportunity for exploration of diverse problems that religiosities seek to address. Many of today’s pressing political and social problems can be better understood with more knowledge about the religious practices that undergird them. By exploring the public and private concerns that religions engage — for example, the nature of community and solitude, suffering and death, good and evil — students will discover new ways of interpreting the complex world in which they live. As students venture into the religions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, they will learn about behaviors, doctrines, values, rituals, texts, and forms of community. Students will also discover much about conflict and accord within and between religions, as well as between religious and secular perspectives.

The Department’s goals for all students enrolled in Religion courses include: (1) developing tools for understanding and interpreting religions in varied historical, cultural, and social contexts and for identifying and interpreting patterns across religious histories and cultures; and (2) engaging critically the various ways in which scholars of religion have attempted to understand and evaluate the nature and functions of religion as a vital force in human society, behavior, and global politics, both in the past and present.

The Department of Religion offers students a broad range of course options in recognition of the variety of academic approaches to the study of religion, including courses that engage the category of religion through textual analysis, sociology, historical studies, ethnography, material and popular culture studies, and philosophy, among others. In addition, department faculty participate in many of the College’s multidisciplinary programs, including Africana Studies, American Culture, Asian Studies, Environmental Studies, Jewish Studies, and Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and students are encouraged to take advantage of the resources available in these and other programs. We also encourage all students to apply for Junior Year Abroad. Majors are expected to develop breadth and depth in their studies, both in terms of methodology and traditions.

II. REQUIREMENTS

Requirements for the Concentration: A minimum of 11 units, including Religion 200. Three seminars are required (two 300-level courses and the Senior Seminar, Religion 300). Students are required to take Religion 200 by the end of their junior
year and highly recommended that they take these courses in their sophomore year. Students are expected to pursue a program of study marked by both breadth and depth. Of the 11 units required for the concentration, normally no more than two may be at the 100-level. However, students may petition for an additional 100-level to be counted toward the concentration. No more than 1 unit of fieldwork and/or independent work courses may count toward the concentration. After declaring a concentration in Religion, no courses taken under the Non-Recorded Option serve to fulfill the requirements.

**Senior-year Requirements:** All Seniors are required to take Religion 300, the Senior Seminar, in the fall semester of their senior year.

**Thesis Option:** If a senior elects to do a thesis and has departmental approval they can do so by completing Religion 301. The thesis option is a year-long undertaking and should develop the work begun in the Senior Seminar. **Only students who complete a thesis are eligible for departmental honors.** The Senior Seminar receives a letter grade. The Senior Thesis is graded Distinction, Satisfactory, or Unsatisfactory. Petitions for exemption from these requirements, granted only in special circumstances, must be submitted to the chair in writing by the first day of classes in the A-semester of the senior year.

**Requirements for the Correlate Sequence:** The Religion Department offers a correlate sequence in the study of religion that allows students to pursue study in an area of significant interest outside of their field of concentration. The sequence requires 6 units, 1 unit at the 100-level, 3 at the 200-level and two seminars at the 300-level. After declaring a correlate sequence in Religion, no courses taken under the Non-Recorded Option serve to fulfill the requirements.

**Religion 200b: Regarding Religion**
This course is a full unit, graded course offered every B semester. It is open only to majors. In this course, you will be introduced to the major themes and problems in the study of religion, and to some of the more important – and more problematic – responses to those problems that have developed over the years. It is recommended that students take 200 in the sophomore year, though in certain cases it may be taken in the junior year.

**Religion 300a: Senior Seminar**
A requirement for all majors, the senior seminar is an exploration of critical issues in the study of Religion and a collaborative writing workshop. The seminar culminates in each student writing a 25 page independent research paper on a topic of the student’s choosing. During the semester, students will present their research and writing, which we will peer-review as a class.

**Breadth and Depth**
Students are expected to pursue a program of study marked by both breadth and depth. This means that students are encouraged to study a variety of religious traditions and methodological approaches, but should develop expertise in a particular tradition and/or approach.

**NOTE:** Although the Religion Department does not have required course sequences, instructors may indicate prerequisites for particular courses. Be sure to check the catalogue for information on prerequisites. In all cases, however, students benefit from obtaining a foundation in a particular area before moving on to more advanced work.

### III. Declaring a Religion Concentration

**Step 1:** Go to the Registrar’s office and pick up two forms: the “Declaration of Major” form and the “Field of Concentration” card (better known as the “yellow cards”). You will need three copies of the Field of Concentration card.

**Step 2:** Meet with the Chair of the Religion Department. The Chair will sign your Declaration of Major form and assign you a major advisor.

**Step 3:** Fill out the Field of Concentration card. These cards allow you to create a tentative plan for the courses you will take for rest of your time at Vassar. The first column is for classes taken within the major. The second column is for classes taken within the major division (Social Sciences) but outside the major (Anthropology, Economics, Education, Geography, History, Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology). The third column is for classes taken outside of the major division (Arts, Foreign Language, Natural Science classes, and multidisciplinary classes).

Remember that 25% of your course work must consist of classes taken outside of your major division.

When you fill out the card, take into account all major and college requirements.

Remember that the courses you project you might take will likely change as the course catalog will change from year to year, professors go on sabbatical, and new classes become available. The purpose is to give you an idea about how you *could* complete your study at Vassar.

Fill out this card in pencil as you might want to change things when you consult your advisor.
Step 4: Meet with your new advisor who will sign your Declaration of Major form and your Field of Concentration cards. Make sure you bring three copies of the card for your advisor to sign.

Step 5 (FOR FRESHMEN ONLY): Go see your pre-major advisor, who also must sign your Declaration of Major form.

Step 6: Deliver your Declaration of Major form and one copy of your Field of Concentration card to the Registrar. Your advisor should have another copy of the card, and the third copy is for you.

IV. THE ADVISOR

How do I get an advisor? The Department Chair will assign an advisor for you, based on your interests and on faculty availability. If there is a particular professor with whom you would like to work, these preferences will be taken into account. While it is useful for you to have an advisor whose work is close to your own interests, all faculty members in the department are qualified to advise you in the major.

When do I see my advisor? You must visit your advisor during every pre-registration period to discuss classes and requirements, and to obtain your PIN number or your advisor’s signature. Other than that, you should meet with your advisor whenever you want to make an important academic decision. You should meet with your advisor while forming JYA plans, adding a correlate or another major, obtaining credit for classes taken at other institutions, etc.

Remember, ultimately your advisor confirms for the Registrar that you have completed an appropriate course of study and that you can graduate, so keep in touch.

V. THE THESIS ELECTIVE

The thesis is optional and requires departmental approval. The thesis option is an opportunity for you to develop and express an argument or idea that is important to you and that you have, through classes, prepared yourself to address in a manner that is clear, well-organized, and supported by evidence. This is your chance to use the tools and knowledge you have gained in your studies to conceptualize and execute an important and independent work.
The Senior Thesis is graded Distinction, Satisfactory, or Unsatisfactory. Your advisor will provide you with a formal written comment on your work at the end of the second semester.

Every department at Vassar has different goals and guidelines for the Senior Thesis. Here’s what we are looking for:

**Depth.** The depth of thinking and analysis in a thesis is more important than its overall length. Students must select specific topics that lead to a deep understanding, rather than broad, general topics. Methodological awareness is an important component of depth. This means that you demonstrate awareness of how your thesis fits in with the general discourse of the academic study of religion. How you approach your subject is as important as the subject itself.

**Originality.** To be original, a thesis does not have to go "where no one has gone before." You may, though, choose to look at familiar material in a new way, from a perspective that has not yet been widely considered. Or, you may choose to use the standard tools of religious studies to analyze a body of data that has not usually been considered from that perspective. Basically, the originality of the topic choice is a matter of degree. There should be something new about your work. Your choice of topic is in itself an aspect of originality. What will you build with the tools of our field? What results when you, rather than a professor, set the agenda for your work?

**Structure.** The overall structure you use to present your work is generally up to you. What we do stress, however, is that your structure presents a sustained, coherent argument that develops a particular question or idea. It is probably most helpful if you think of your thesis in terms of a full-scale article rather than as a miniature book. You do need various sections to present the several aspects of your work, but formal chapters can create more problems than they solve. The Department is concerned with the quality, not the length, of your thesis; we would rather have you revise and perfect a 40-page thesis than submit a rough 80-page thesis.

**Choosing Your Topic.** The most important beginning place for this choice is to make sure that it is something you have an interest in and will enjoy focusing on. The Senior Seminar plays an important role in this regard. You will have to spend a great deal of time with whatever subject you select, and only natural interest will sustain you through the drearier aspects (every project has them) of the overall work. At the same time, you must also pick a topic for which you have prepared yourself through coursework.
Thesis Petition. To write a thesis you must submit a “thesis petition.” Check with the professor of RELI 300 for the due date. Please see the Thesis Handbook for a copy of the petition.

VI. CREDIT POLICY

The Religion Department requires 11 units for major concentration, including 200, 300, and two additional seminars at the 300-level. Of the 11 units required for the concentration, normally no more than two may be at the 100-level. However, students may petition for an additional 100-level to be counted toward the concentration.

100 and 200 level Vassar Classes
In exceptional cases, a single class at the 100-level or 200-level from among the offerings of a multidisciplinary program or other departments may be counted toward the Religion major. Students must petition the department by submitting the syllabus of the course in question for consideration. Students should not rely on precedent regarding which courses might have been deemed acceptable in the past, nor should they plan their course schedules with the expectation that the petition will be accepted, as the acceptance of the petition is entirely at the discretion of the department on a case-by-case basis. The department follows the College’s policy of allowing only two courses to be counted toward both the religion major and a second major.

Vassar Seminars
Under some circumstances, majors and correlates will be permitted to take a seminar in another Vassar department if the Religion department approves the course. Again, as stated above, students should not rely on precedent regarding which seminars might have been deemed acceptable in the past, nor should they plan their course schedules with the expectation that the petition to count a particular seminar will be accepted, as the acceptance of the petition is entirely at the discretion of the department on a case-by-case basis.

Independent Work, Reading Courses, and Fieldwork
No more than 1 unit of fieldwork, independent work, and/or reading courses may count toward the concentration. Under exceptional circumstances, a student may petition the department for an additional 0.5 unit to count toward the major though there is no guarantee that this will be allowed.

Fieldwork
The Religion Department does not sponsor specific fieldwork programs. If you wish to receive credit in Religion for fieldwork, however, you need to discuss this with your advisor and apply for
credit. Ask the Fieldwork Office what opportunities are available that relate to your interests and major.

**Independent Work and Reading Courses**
If you have a particular interest but there are no courses available that meet that interest, you may want to pursue independent work. Students receive 1/2 unit for independent work, and the work is ungraded. Discuss your interest with your advisor, and he or she will help you to construct a proposal of readings that you will complete over the course of the semester, culminating in a final paper. Your major advisor need not be the faculty member with whom you pursue the independent work course. Only under exceptional circumstances will students be allowed to register for 1 unit of independent work.

Reading courses are 1/2-unit courses that have no specific meeting times. Rather, you meet with a professor at the beginning of the semester and receive a syllabus of readings on a topic. Reading courses also culminate in a final essay, but, like fieldwork, they count as pass or fail.

**Summer Study and Transfer Credits**
A student may receive up to 3½ units from summer study, study abroad, and/or transfer credit toward the major.

Seminars taken during study abroad or summer study will not be counted toward the major or correlate.

Any Advanced Placement tests, summer study, or transfer credits count as ungraded work.

The department must approve college-level courses in Religion taken at other institutions before transfer credit can be granted. In order for any units to count toward your major you first must petition the department for approval. This is done by emailing the Chair your class syllabi, all graded work, and any other supporting materials you think might help your petition. The Chair then distributes this relevant information to the rest of the department for the ultimate determination of credit.

**Non-Recorded Option**
After a Religion major has declared, no further courses taken under the Non-Recording option may serve to fulfill the requirements. Any courses taken under the Non-Recorded Option at the 200 or 300 level may not count toward a religion major.
VII. STUDY AWAY
Many Vassar students find that a semester or a year spent studying abroad can enrich their academic experience and broaden their horizons. Most often, students take time abroad during their junior year. If a student wishes to go abroad during his or her sophomore year, he or she must declare a major before then. The Religion Department encourages students to pursue study abroad if they meet study abroad GPA requirements and have fulfilled sufficient course requirements for their religion major.

A student must start planning his or her year abroad in the first semester of sophomore year, but it is never too early to begin researching interesting programs. One must apply to Vassar as well as to a specific abroad program to receive permission to take a semester or year of academic leave. This requires dealing with applications, transcript records, and recommendations, so best not to leave any of this until the last minute.

Vassar sponsors several abroad programs and approves numerous other programs all over the world. Although none of these programs is sponsored by the Religion Department, credits can be transferred and approved through an application process. See above section.

If you are planning to study away and would like to receive credit toward your major, it is best to check with the Study Away Office (located in Main N-173) and the Department Chair in advance to determine the policy of the college with regard to your particular program. Often credits but not grades will transfer from abroad programs.

VIII. HONORS & PRIZES

Departmental Internships
The Department of Religion participates in the College’s Academic Intern Program. Each year the department selects an intern from among the senior majors on the strength of their work in Religion. For their service, the College pays the intern a wage comparable to most student jobs.

The intern helps out in the department office, arranges department and majors’ events, and works on special projects such as this handbook and updates to the department website.

Departmental Honors
To graduate with departmental honors in Religion, a student must meet the following criteria:
- General academic excellence in coursework across the College’s curriculum.
- Scholastic excellence evidenced by writing a senior thesis and superior academic performance in courses in the department.
- The departmental faculty’s sense of the student’s serious commitment and comprehensive grasp of the scholarly study of religion.

**Academic Prizes**

Each year the Religion Department presents two awards to majors for outstanding work in the study of religion. Senior recipients of these prizes are honored at a public assembly the day before Commencement. Receiving an academic award is not only a great honor: it comes with a gift or small monetary award as well.

- **The Betsy Halpern-Amaru Book Prize.** The Betsy Halpern-Amaru Book Prize is awarded to a graduating senior who, in undertaking either a major or a correlate sequence program of study in Religion, demonstrates excellence in the study of classical texts of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. This prize is named in honor of Betsy Halpern-Amaru, a dedicated Professor of Religion who taught in the Department from 1981-2001.

- **The J. Howard Howson Prize.** This prize is awarded for distinguished achievement by a student concentrating in Religion. In selecting the recipient, the Department employs the following criteria: excellence in the study of religion, growth in grasp of the field and of its relations with other studies, and contribution to the work and life of the department. The prize was named in honor of J. Howard Howson, who was Professor of Religion and Chairman of the Department of Religion from 1929 to 1959.

**IX. After Vassar**

What do Religion majors do after Vassar? Everything! The study of religion provides a thorough liberal arts education and offers students the critical thinking tools necessary for any future employment. For instance, law, business, and medical schools have always considered a broad liberal arts education the best preparation for professional study. Graduates from Vassar’s Department of Religion have gone on to become doctors, activists, journalists, musicians, political leaders, lawyers, scholars, teachers, ministers, business people, actors, Peace Corps workers and pursued scores of other careers; many have won grants and fellowships to study around the world. Religion is a fundamental part of any society, and the tools you learn in the study of Religion at Vassar will help you understand the worlds you live in—near and far—that much better.
X. FACULTY

Marc Michael Epstein, Professor: B.A., Oberlin College; M.Phil., M.A., Ph.D., Yale University. Marc Epstein’s work marshals the methodologies of art history and classical textual study as well as those of cultural studies and the histoire des mentalités in his examination of a variety of topics including medieval Jewish art and literature. He teaches courses on religion and the arts, Judaism, and Western religious traditions, including Western esotericism.

E. H. Rick Jarow, Associate Professor: B.A., M.A., M.Phil, Ph.D., Columbia University. Rick Jarow’s teaching and research interests include religions of South Asia (Hindu Traditions and Buddhist Traditions); East/West Studies; Indian languages and literatures; the poetics of religious experience; and vocation.

Jonathon Kahn, Associate Professor and Chair: A.B., Princeton University; M.A., M.Phil, Ph.D., Columbia University. Jonathon Kahn’s field of specialty is Philosophy of Religion and his research interests include African-American Religious Thought; American Pragmatism; American Religion and Its Philosophical Critics; Religion and Social Criticism.

Lynn LiDonnici, Associate Professor: B.A., Hunter College, City University of New York; M.A., Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania. Lynn LiDonnici specializes in ancient Western religions and their formation in and around the Mediterranean. She teaches courses on Biblical literature and the social history of ancient Mediterranean religions and on Magic in Antiquity.

Rose Muravchick, Mellon Post-Doc in Islam: B.A. University of Pennsylvania; M.A., Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania. Rose Muravchick teaches classes in the study of Islam. Her research focus is on Islamic dress and aesthetics.

Michael J. Walsh, Associate Professor: B.A., University of Cape Town; M.A., Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara. Michael Walsh teaches in the areas of East Asian religions and method and theory in the study of religion. He is particularly interested in monastic life, the production of sacred space, cultural geography, and the interconnections between colonialism, religion, and modernity.

Christopher White, Associate Professor: A.B., University of California, Davis; M.T.S., Harvard Divinity School; A.M., Ph.D., Harvard University. Christopher White teaches in the area of American Religious history and religion and popular culture. He is also interested in religion and the media.