

Department of Religion
Vassar College

THE MAJORS' HANDBOOK

Academic Year 2005-2006

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I. ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

The concentration in religion is intended to provide 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 religions seek to address. Many of today's pressing political and social problems are illuminated by an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices that lie beneath the news headlines. 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 beliefs, behaviors, values, rituals, texts, and forms of community. Students will also discover something about conflict and accord within and between religions, as well as between religious and secular perspectives.

The Department's goals for majors, correlates, and non-majors 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 (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 in the 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. Students may also take advantage of a variety of opportunities for study away that can enrich their work in the discipline. Majors are expected to develop breadth and depth in their studies, both in terms of methodology and traditions, culminating in the writing of the senior thesis under the direction of a faculty member.

II. REQUIREMENTS

Requirements for the Concentration: 11 units, including Religion 270, 271, three seminars at the 300-level, and a senior thesis or project. It is recommended that students take Religion 270 in the sophomore or junior year. Students are expected to pursue a program of study marked by both breadth and depth. Of the 11 units required for the concentration, no more than two may be at the 100-level. No more than 1 1/2 units of field work, independent study, and/or reading 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.

Religion 270: Department Colloquium

The Colloquium is a half-unit, ungraded course offered every B semester. A majors-only class, it serves as an introduction to various approaches to the study of religion employed by the faculty. Each week, a different faculty member teaches the class; it offers students the opportunity to meet a number of professors and to have the opportunity to learn and employ a variety of methods in the study of religion. Most students take 270 in the sophomore year, although it can be taken in the junior year. The class meets every week for the first six weeks of the semester.

Religion 271: Advanced Methods in the Study of Religion

Advanced Methods is a half-unit, graded, majors-only course. Taken in the A semester of the senior year, it prepares majors to write the senior thesis. The class meets about every other week for the entire semester.

Religion 300: Senior Thesis/Project

All senior majors register for one unit during the second semester, through which they write an essay under the supervision of a faculty advisor. Under special circumstances, a student may register for Religion 300 in the first semester. The Senior Thesis is graded as Pass, Fail, or Distinction.

3 Seminars

Choose three seminars at the 300-level that focus on topics for which you have done sufficient preparatory coursework. Keep in mind that the range of offerings will vary from year to year. Seminars taken during study away will not be counted toward the major or correlate. Under some circumstances, majors and correlates will be permitted to take a seminar in another Vassar department if the Religion department approves the course.

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 in preparation for writing the thesis in the senior year.

Requirements for the Correlate Sequence: 6 units: 1 unit at the 100-level, 3 at the 200-level, and 2 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.

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 premajor 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. SO, YOU WANT TO WRITE A THESIS?

Your thesis 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 study.

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 much 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 usually 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 35-page thesis than submit a rough 60 page thesis.

The thesis is ungraded. Students receive a pass or fail grade for Religion 300: Senior Thesis or Project. Your advisor and your second reader will provide you with a formal written comment on your work at the end of the second semester.

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. 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. With that in mind, here are some suggestions:

- ♣ One suggestion is to re-work an existing paper into an article with a greater degree of depth and methodological awareness than is usually possible in the typical undergraduate paper. If you still have "unfinished business" in relation to a subject you loved but had to leave too quickly, the thesis is an excellent opportunity to take that material to a higher level. These papers do not have to have been in Religion courses, but they do have to be "about" religion.
- ♣ If you wish to work on a topic about which you have not yet written, we ask that you select a topic for which you already possess sufficient background - in terms of courses taken - to allow you to complete the thesis in a reasonable amount of time. The department faculty will not approve thesis proposals to work on topics for which students have no coursework preparation.

Projects. In special cases, students may elect to create projects, such as films or oral history archives, rather than exclusively written theses. In order for the Department to approve a project proposal, you must demonstrate that you have sufficient preparation, through coursework, to produce the creative segment of the project. In addition, your proposal must make a strong intellectual case for why a project, rather than a traditional thesis, would be an appropriate way to address your topic. Regardless of the format, the same requirements as to *depth*, *methodological awareness*, and *originality* still apply to the projects. You will need to develop the parameters of your project to include these important elements. Additionally, there will usually be some sort of written *companion* to the project that describes or explains it.

Junior Year Consultation. All students need to consult the Department Chair during B-term of Junior year to get advice in beginning to think about the thesis. Proposals are due early in the A-term of Senior year. Unless you have already given the thesis some thought, you will experience a serious "crunch." Students who are planning to be on JYA in B-term of Junior year should consult the Department Chair before they leave Vassar.

A Selection of Recent Senior Thesis Titles in the Department of Religion:

- ♣ Batia Epelbaum '03, "Mao Zedong Deified: Ritual and the Ritualization for Social Control During the Cultural Revolution"
- ♣ Jonathan Kaufman '03, "Presidential Preachers: Religious Rhetoric in the Political Speeches of John F. Kennedy, George W. Bush, and Joseph Lieberman"
- ♣ Sarah Kay '00, "Nor Are You Free to Abstain from It': The Jewish Component to Jewish Communal Service"

- ♣ Lindsey Kirkpatrick '03, "The Divine Consort in Tantra: The Path to Divine Bliss"
- ♣ Jenna Levy '05, "Are You There, Shechnah? It's Me, Miriam: An Exploration of Women's Kabbalah in the Contemporary Imagination"
- ♣ Caitlin Maloney '05, "Community and Hierarchy in the Roman Catholic Church: The Quandary of Tradition"
- ♣ Emilie Moeckel '05, "The Muslim Veil in France: A Symbol of Religious and Cultural Identity and a Political Tool Used to Fight Islamophobia"
- ♣ James Reich '05, "The Cathedral of Nature: Religious Rhetoric in the American Environmental Movement"
- ♣ Christiana Stout '03, "The Role of Language in the Process of Revelation: A Comparative Study of Two Initiation Discourses in the Nag Hammadi Library"
- ♣ Justina Tate '00, "Freedom Through Separation: The Nation of Islam's Response to Crime and Punishment in America"
- ♣ James Williams '03, "Racial Economic Visions and Religious Community Development"

VI. CREDIT POLICY

The Religion Department requires 11 units for major concentration, including 270, 271, 3 seminars at the 300-level and a one unit senior thesis or project. No more than 1 ½ units of field work, independent study, and/or reading courses may count toward the concentration. This limit does not apply to Religion 270, which is an ungraded half-unit course, nor to Religion 300, the senior thesis. A student may receive credit for summer study and study abroad on academic leave from Vassar.

Seminars

Religion majors must take 3 seminars in Religion in order to fulfill the requirements for the major, and correlates must take 2 seminars in Religion. Seminars taken during study away will not be counted toward the major or correlate. Under some circumstances, majors and correlates will be permitted to take a seminar in another Vassar department if the Religion department approves the course.

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.

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. Religion department faculty members oversee the Green Haven Prison Volunteer Program and students may receive credit in Religion for their fieldwork. Ask the Fieldwork Office what opportunities are available that relate to your interests and major.

Independent Study and Reading Courses

If you have a particular interest but there are no courses available that meet that interest, you may want to pursue an independent study. 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 study course. Students receive 1/2 unit for independent study, and the work is ungraded. Only under exceptional circumstances will students be allowed to register for 1 unit of independent study.

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

Any Advanced Placement tests, summer study, or transfer credits count as ungraded work and are subject to departmental limitations of the number of units which may count toward one's major. College-level courses in Religion taken at other institutions must be approved by the Chair before transfer credit can be granted.

If you know you would like to receive Religion credit for a particular summer course or activity, you should speak with your advisor in advance and he or she can help you apply to receive credit. This process is similar to an independent study application, and you will be expected to write a paper about your learning experience.

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

NOTE: Up to 3 ½ units from study away may be counted toward the major. The seminar requirement cannot be fulfilled through courses taken on JYA.

VIII. HONORS & PRIZES

Departmental Internships

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

The interns help out in the department office, arrange department and majors' events, and work 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:

- ♣ Scholastic excellence as evidenced by (a) strong performance in the student's overall work at Vassar; (b) the passing "With Distinction" of the senior thesis or project and/or (c) 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 a number of 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 Frederic C. Wood, Sr. Book Prize.*** This prize is awarded by the Department of Religion to honor the memory of Frederic C. Wood, Sr. Mr. Wood was a generous supporter of the annual Frederic C. Wood, Jr. Memorial Lecture that has brought to the College important and innovative thinkers in many aspects of religion. This award is presented to a religion major for excellence in moral and ethical concerns.
- ♣ ***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? 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.

X. FACULTY

Marc Michael Epstein, Associate Professor: B.A., Oberlin College; M.Phil., M.A., Ph.D., Yale University. Marc Epstein's work marshalls the methodologies of art history and classical Jewish textual study as well as those of cultural studies and the *histoire des mentalités* in his examination of Medieval Jewish art and literature. He teaches courses on religion and the arts, Judaism, Western religious traditions, as well as courses in the Program in Jewish Studies.

E. H. Rick Jarow, Assistant 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. He also teaches in the Program in Asian Studies.

Jonathon Kahn, Visiting Assistant Professor: 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.

Margaret Leeming, Visiting Instructor: B.A., University of Connecticut; M.A., University of California at Santa Barbara. Margaret Leeming's research and teaching interests include the "Islamic" city; Medieval garden architecture; theories of myth; sacred space; and travel literature. She teaches courses on Islam and on myth and ritual in film.

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.

Lawrence A. Mamiya, Professor and Acting Chair: B.A., University of Hawaii; M.Div., Union Theological Seminary; M.Phil., Ph.D., Columbia University. Lawrence Mamiya specializes in the sociology of African-American religion, especially Islam, and his research and teaching interests address religion in the third world. He is jointly appointed with the Program in Africana Studies.

Michael Walsh, Assistant 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 Chinese Buddhist history, monastic economics, cultural geography, sacred space, and social theory.

Judith Weisenfeld, Associate Professor: A. B., Barnard College; M. A., Ph. D., Princeton University. Judith Weisenfeld is an Americanist specializing in African-American religious history, with a particular focus on African-American women's history and urban history. Her current research explores African American religion in American film.

Tova Weitzman, Lecturer: B.A., Ben Gurion University; M.A., Jewish Theological Seminary. Tova Weitzman teaches Hebrew language courses and courses on modern and postmodern Hebrew literature in English translation.

XI. HANDBOOK CREDITS

The members of the Department of Religion would like to thank Departmental Interns Heidi Handelsman '03 and Molly Powers '03 for their hard work in helping to produce this handbook.