

American Borders: History, Politics and Religion



REL 101-8-20
Elizabeth Hurd

TTH
2:00-3:20PM

This first-year seminar course is a study of American borders, past and present. We read widely in politics, history, religious and cultural studies, anthropology, and border studies. We watch several documentary films, listen to music, and learn from engaging with guest speakers. Central themes include the history of US borders with Mexico, Indigenous communities, protest movements, law and the border, sanctuary and sovereignty, legal exceptionalism, the history of the passport, religious politics of borders, and environmental politics of the borderlands. Border issues are considered from multiple perspectives, including but also going well beyond issues of surveillance and enforcement. As a first-year seminar, this course also emphasizes critical research and writing skills to prepare students for college-level research and writing. Counts toward the Religion, Law and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentration.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

Department of
Religious Studies

Introduction to the Study of Religion



REL 170-20

James Bielo

TTH

9:30-10:50PM

This course will guide students through a series of case studies that highlight the practical, ethical, and material dimensions of religions around the world.

These case studies dramatize how religions are lived with and against the grain of established doctrine, so that students will gain a richer understanding of the ways religious customs have shaped the world around them. The course also serves to introduce students to the basic methods scholars employ to study religion, including history, ethnography, textual analysis, ritual theory, phenomenology, and comparison—tools through which students will formulate their own accounts of religious phenomena.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

Department of
Religious Studies

Introduction to Judaism



REL 230-20

MWF

Barry Wimpfheimer

11:00-11:50AM

This course attempts to answer the questions "What is Judaism?" and "Who is a Jew?" by surveying the broad arc of Jewish history, reviewing the practices and beliefs that have defined and continue to define Judaism as a religion, sampling the vast treasure of Jewish literatures, and analyzing the unique social conditions that have made the cultural experience of Jewishness so significant. The class will employ a historical structure to trace the evolutions of Jewish literature, religion, and culture through the ages.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

Department of
Religious Studies

Introduction to Christianity



REL 240-20

Lily

Stewart

TTH

11:00-12:20PM

How many ways are there to be a Christian? What counts as Christianity, what doesn't, and who ultimately gets to decide? Where and when does Christian practice take place and what does it look like? How has Christianity been shaped by cultures around the world, and how has it shaped those cultures in return? This class explores Christianity from a perspective of religious diversity.

Using case studies from documentaries, podcasts, scriptures, scholarly articles, short stories, music videos, and films, students will encounter a variety of Christian lifeways, practices, beliefs, and identities. They will consider how important concepts in Christianity—like faith, sacrifice, and sanctity—have been variously defined and experienced across Christian communities.

We will ask what factors account for the broad range of Christian doctrines and denominations, and analyze the anxieties, conflicts, and points of creativity have arisen out of this diversity.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

Department of
Religious Studies

Introduction to Black Religion: The North American Experience



REL 262-20/ BLK_ST 262-20

MW

KB Dennis Meade

9:30-10:50AM

This course introduces you to the variety of Black religions that developed during and after the Atlantic slave trade up to the present in what is now the United States. The historical contexts surrounding the development of Black religions and the lived experiences of Black Americans are the main topics of our course. The course orients us to these traditions as continuities/changes of West African religious cosmologies. We explore the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, the role of politics, the construction of racial identities, and most importantly, the diversity of Black Religion in the United States and locally in Chicago. We will examine the interplay between religion, and race within various forms of Christianity, Islam, and American expressive cultures.

Winter 2025

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Religious Studies

Religion and the Body in China



REL 316-20

Kevin

Buckelew

MW

3:30-4:50PM

The fragility of the human body, its susceptibility to illness and death, provoked a wide array of responses among religious practitioners in pre-modern China. Some pursued supernatural longevity and even immortality through various regimes of self-cultivation. Others, by contrast, renounced the body in part or whole through dramatic acts of self-immolation. Even in death, however, many aspired to rebirth in heavenly realms where bodies do not grow old and die, but rather live forever in bliss. This course examines these various attempts to overcome death in Chinese religion—including Buddhism, Daoism, and traditions that fall between these large categories—seeking to understand how the mortality of the body was used to authorize particular modes of embodied living. In the process, we will explore how these modes of religious life shaped attitudes toward food, medicine, gender, sexuality, and family. Counts toward Religion, Health and Medicine (RHM) and Religion, Sexuality and Gender (RSG) religious studies major concentrations.

Winter 2025

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Religious Studies

Religion and Politics in the People's Republic of China



REL 318-22

Antonio Terrone

TTH

2:00-3:20PM

This course will examine the role of religion in post-1980's China with an emphasis on the political implications of the practice of religion in the People's Republic of China. Students will read various forms of literature and policy documents to assess the extent to which Marxist theory is central to the interpretation of "religion" in Communist China. Primary sources will include Chinese constitutional articles, white papers, and editorials in English translation. Secondary sources will cover a wide range of interpretations and perspectives on the position of religious institutions and religious practices in the PRC. The first part of this course will investigate the expression of religiosity under Communism in China; the rehabilitation of Confucian values; the constitutional protection of religion and religious belief in China; the relationship between ethnicity and religious policies; the Sinicization of religion; and the administration of the five officially accepted religious traditions in the People's Republic of China (Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam). Counts toward the Religion, Law and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentration.

Winter 2025

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Religious Studies

NEW

Being Human in a More Than Human World



**REL 319-24/
HUM 370-5-30
Sarah
Jacoby**

**MW
12:30-1:50PM**

A binding principle of interrelationship weaves through domains as divergent as ecology, Buddhism, and critical theory, among others. This course takes an expansive look at various permutations of interdependence as imagined across terrains ranging from millennia-old Buddhist texts to modern explorations into Buddhist environmentalism (ecodharma), political ecology, and critical theory. In this process, the elements that comprise our environment—earth, water, air, minerals, trash & treasures—will transform from scenery to agentic forces with whom living beings act. What alternative ways of being and knowing can we imagine that present human agency in relational terms, co-constituted not just by other organisms, but also by a web of environmental conditions that make life possible? How can we re-envision humans' interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world in ways that can mitigate climate grief and apathy and support sustainable living practices? Approved for credit for Environmental Policy & Culture major/minor. Counts toward Religion, Health and Medicine (RHM) religious studies major concentrations.

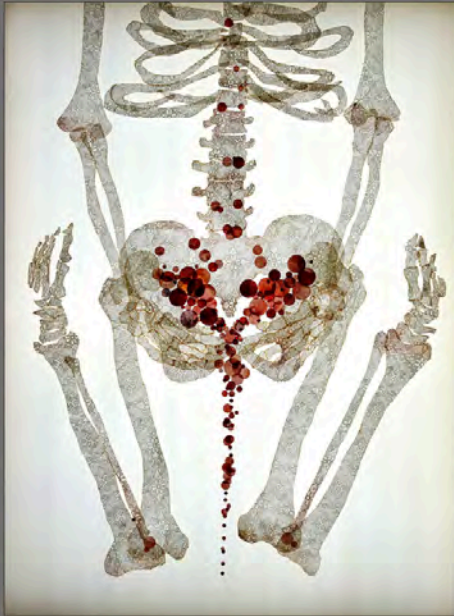
Winter 2025

Northwestern

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Religious Studies

NEW

Rabbinic Sex Stories



REL 330-20

Shira

Schwartz

MW

12:30-1:50PM

Do rabbis have sex? Is Jewish knowledge erotic? And what is “the Talmud”? This course will explore these questions in relation to the original rabbis of late antiquity (3rd-7th centuries CE) through narratives, myths, and ethnographic accounts about rabbinic sex, gender and sexuality in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. You will learn to expand the definition of what constitutes “sex” or “desire,” “kinship” or “connection,” “body” or “text,” by examining ancient rabbinic forms of gendered, textual, and bodily transmission. Students will learn to become curious about bodily norms that are quite removed from the worlds that we inhabit no matter one’s starting point, and will learn to make connections across the ancient and contemporary. This is a deep-reading, discussion-based course that will provide students with an opportunity to learn how to read rabbinic texts in translation, to generate conversational learning through Jewish textual practices like question-and-response, and partnered study, also known as hevruta, and to deepen your knowledge of contemporary theory in gender/sex and sexuality. Counts towards Religion, Law, and Politics (RLP) and Religion, Sexuality, and Gender (RSG) religious studies major concentrations.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

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Talmud



REL 339-21

MW

Barry Wimpfheimer

2:00-3:20PM

The Talmud is one of the most important works of Jewish literature. For the last millennium, Talmud study has been a central part of Jewish religious and cultural practice. Despite the splintering of Judaism into different denominations, Jews the world over are unified by their commitment to studying Talmud. The Talmud is an unusual work of literature, and it has been credited as an influence on codes of law, sermons, modern works of Jewish literature, and even Seinfeld. This course will explain the Talmud's import and durability within Jewish culture while introducing students to the rigors of legal analysis that lie at the heart of most talmudic passages. The course is ideal for those interested in religion, law, logic games and questions of textual interpretation. The course will study the Talmud entirely in English translation; there is neither a language prerequisite nor an expectation of prior experience reading the Talmud. Counts toward Religion, Law, and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentrations.

Winter 2025

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Religious Studies

Medicine, Miracles, and Magic: Healthcare in the Middle Ages



REL 349
Lily Stewart

TTH
3:30-4:50PM

Today, religion and science are often regarded as separate spheres of knowledge and practice, but was this always the case? In this class, we will explore the overlapping uses of medicine, miracles, and magic in premodern healthcare. We will ask what kinds of people were able to practice medicine (priests? physicians? nuns? magicians?), why a person's barber was also their surgeon, how the dead supported the health of the living, and why rituals like confession could treat stomach aches and other ailments.

We will learn what a vial of urine could tell a medieval physician about a patient's habits, consider how an individual's astrological sign influenced their treatment plan, and discuss what an excess of garlic in a person's diet might tell us about the moral state of their spirit. Counts toward Religion, Health and Medicine (RHM) studies major concentrations.

Winter 2025

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Religious Studies

Religion, Film, TV: Religion, Existentialism, and Film



**REL 371-21 /
RTVF 398-20
Michelle
Molina**

**W
3:00-5:30PM**

In the aftermath of the World War I, many artists and filmmakers asked new questions about the relationship between realism and religion. Could one reconcile concrete reality (or realism) with faith in the other-worldly? We study mid-to-late 20th century filmmakers who sought to understand and portray life's many meanings by presenting protagonists who actively take up religious life, or who consider themselves inhabiting a godless and meaningless universe. What dynamics drove the relationships between religion and modernity, faith and ethics, reality and the supernatural, observable phenomena and invisible causes? How did one make sense of death in a meaningless universe? Was the universe meaningless? Could meaning be found in realism itself? Within realist film, how can we explain the simultaneity of critique of religion and nostalgia or longing for absent religious meaning? In studying philosophy and film together, we will discuss the relationship between realism, atheism, Christianity and modernity, as well as the role of Christian symbolism in existentialist literature and film. We will read Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Freud, watch films made by Robert Bresson, Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Ingmar Bergman.

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Religious Studies

NEW

Exhibiting Religion



REL 379-21

James Bielo

TTH

2:00-3:20PM

How do museums exhibit the sacred? In this course, students will explore diverse representations of religion in museum settings and other contexts of public display. Student research will include engagement with Chicago area museums, and the opportunity to design their own exhibit.

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Religious Studies

Theories of Religion



REL 395-20
Sarah Taylor

TH
2:00-4:30PM

What counts or does not count as “religion”? How do we know? And who gets to decide? This course explores the major foundational theorists in the field of Religious Studies, while placing them into conversation with contemporary perspectives in the field. We begin by asking “What is a theory? And what does it mean to have a theory about something?” We then dig into those theories and engage with them -- “activating theory” by representing each theory we study in creative and participatory ways that actively involve the whole class. Throughout the quarter, you will be formulating your own theory of religion and then making the case for it in your final project. Have you taken theory courses in the past that are a bit dry and opaque? We take a different tack. Put on your creative and artistic thinking caps as we make theories of religion come alive in unique and innovative ways. This course involves music, art, video, podcasts, and other artistic mediums, in addition to written texts.

Winter 2025

Northwestern

Department of
Religious Studies

Religion & Capitalism



REL 471-21 / ANTHRO 490-29

W

James Bielo

2:00-5:00PM

This course will engage historical and ethnographic sources that examine the diverse entanglements between religion and capitalism across cultural contexts. Our organizing question is this: how have religious expressions and capitalist systems mutually formed one another? We will consider cases such as Islamic banking; the commodification of religious materiality; theologies of financial prosperity in multiple traditions; ties between neoliberalism and religious change; and anti-capitalist movements grounded in religious frameworks. Students will conduct original research that explores a question they design in collaboration with the professor and course colleagues.

Winter 2025

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Black Magic: Conjure and Healing Traditions in Black Atlantic Religions



REL 471-22

M

KB Dennis Meade

2:30-5:30PM

In this course we will explore the cosmological, material, and spiritual technologies in Black Atlantic magico-religious traditions in the Caribbean and U.S. South. Our readings will help us interrogate the distinctions between practitioners self-understanding of supernatural technologies and the academic study of these traditions through the ethnographic and anthropological lens. Through theory, case studies, and primary sources we will trace the impact of antiblackness on the criminalization of these magical traditions from the colonial period to the present.

Winter 2025

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Graduate Seminar: Buddhist Studies: State of the Field



REL 473

Sarah Jacoby

F

1:00-3:30PM

This course will consider the state of the field of Buddhist Studies by examining a selection of relevant recent scholarly works. The nine weeks of this course will survey a wide range of topics, such as Buddhist ritual, cosmology, literature, philosophy, geopolitics, and intellectual history. We will attend not only to the range of subject matter covered in new Buddhist Studies scholarship, but also to the methodologies and theoretical approaches favored in selected works. Through engaging in what we can call a type of “reverse engineering process” in which we analyze the parts that comprise the whole of recent monographs in the field of Buddhist studies, our goal will be not only to critique, but to consider how scholars have put together recent projects with an eye toward preparing students for their own research and writing. All required course readings are in English; this is a graduate seminar but motivated undergraduates with a background in Buddhist Studies courses are welcome to request permission from the professor to register.

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