

WINTER 2026

First-Year Writing Seminar:



COUNTER-SOVEREIGNS, DISSIDENTS & HERETICS: RELIGION AND POLITICS BEYOND THE STATE

Professor Elizabeth Hurd

TTH 3:30-4:50pm

REL 101-8-21

Modern political ideals such as democracy, multiculturalism, pluralism, secularism, toleration, and the concept of religion itself, are defined in relation to contingent features of the modern state. This course steps outside of the “state box” to explore alternative formations of political and religious agency and solidarity as embodied in the words and actions of counter-sovereigns, dissenters, heretics, dissidents, and reformers. Paying close attention to the contours and contents of specific forms of dissent, and comparing them to each other, we will study efforts to challenge, rewrite, remake, and/or cultivate indifference to dominant, state-aligned secular and religious identities, ideologies, and interests. Geographically, the course will cover a range of contexts, from the U.S. to Colombia, from Egypt to Haiti, and from Mexico to France to Israel/Palestine. Students will be encouraged to think creatively about, and perhaps even contribute to, the generation of new possibilities for living together beyond the confines of secular or religious nationalisms.



Introduction to Judaism: Jewish Texts

Professor Shira E. Schwartz
MW 11-12:20pm



image by Lynne Avadenka

This course serves as an Introduction to Judaism through an introduction to Jewish textual sources. The course will explore critical tenets of Jewish life and practice through a range of classical and contemporary Jewish textual genres, as well as Jewish textual artifacts, ritual objects, and forms of media, like Torah scrolls, Jewish type, and digital commentary. Students will learn how to engage Jewish texts through different Jewish reading practices and hermeneutics, including through partnered text-study (havruta). Our approach will also pay attention to the media and materiality of Jewish transmission across different kinds of Jewish sources.

The course counts towards the Media, Technology, Journalism and Religion (MTJR) major concentrations.

GRADUATE SEMINAR: RELIGION AND THE MORE THAN HUMAN



REL 482-20 | Professor Sarah Jacoby | M 3:00-5:30pm

Interdependence, relatedness, entanglement, co-presence, symbiosis, hybridity, dependent origination—these are some of the vocabularies for describing the ways in which humans are inextricably connected to the more-than-human in all its varieties, including plants, other animals, non-organic matter, and spiritual presences/unseen beings. These myriad ways of describing interrelationship weave through domains as divergent as botany, life sciences, philosophy, and religious studies. This course takes a broad look at this vibrant theme, dwelling on the study of religion as a discipline and the tools it provides for considering the more than human. Course readings will include everything from Indigenous religions to Buddhism and Islam, tailored to the interests of graduate students in the course.

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BUDDHIST AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

Professor Sarah Jacoby W 3:00-5:30pm

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REL 315-20



In the middle of the twentieth century, cutting-edge literary theorists concluded that autobiography was exclusively a product of “Western” individualistic culture, thereby ignoring the literary output of large parts of the globe, including Buddhist religious literature. The goal of this course is to explore Buddhist biography and autobiography as literary genres and as lenses through which we can examine the various meanings of living an exemplary Buddhist life, focusing on religious literature from India and Tibet. Questions the course will probe include: How did a religious doctrine such as Buddhism, which denies the ultimate existence of the self, become a major locus of auto/biographical writing? What is the nature of the self as it is expressed in Buddhist religious auto/biography, and what were the aims of this literature? What can we learn from reading biographies and autobiographies about Buddhist selves, societies, and histories? How do differences of gender, nationality, and religious lineage inform auto/biographical representations of the self?

Puppets, Robots, and other Uncanny Doubles

Professor Kevin Buckelew
MW 2-3:20pm

REL 101-8-22

Long before the modern age of AI, stories of humanoid automata—walking statues, puppets come to life, golems on patrol—circulated across the world. Like AI chatbots, such automata are fabricated by humans in our own likeness. They resemble us, but they are somehow different. Sometimes they are radically helpful or smart, better at what they do than any human could be. Other times they are evil and destructive, more malicious than we might think humanly possible. In still other cases they are just creepy, combining the familiar with the strange in an unsettling way. This class treats such automata as our “uncanny doubles” that hold up a mirror to humanity. What forgotten or repressed aspects of ourselves might we glimpse if we stop to gaze in that mirror? In other words, how have puppets, robots, and other such figures served in different times and places to stage the problem of human doubleness—whether divine, demonic, or simply uncanny?

And how should we analyze the unsettling psychic effects ensuing from such glimpses of our own multiplicity? Searching for answers, our class will scrutinize a range of sources from the ancient world through contemporary popular culture.



Sin, Salvation, and Racialization in Latin America

Professor Michelle Molina
TH 2:00-4:30pm



The vibrant culture of an Indigenous people, the import of African slaves with their varied traditions, and the domination of a European Christian settler class: these are all factors shared by Latin America and the United States. Despite these common factors, racializing practices and the emergence of “race” are quite different in the two regions. Focusing primarily on Mexico, we see how religion and race are intertwined, beginning with the formative colonial period. To understand the complicated permutations of race in Latin America, we study three realms: Spanish law, the institutional Catholic church, and the devotional lives of historical actors, from the colonial period through the twentieth century.

*The course counts towards the Religion, Law, and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentration.

ISLAM AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

At the turn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of the world's Muslims lived under the British Empire. British colonialism and imperialism had an incalculable impact on the modern history of Islam. This course explores that impact in the domains of religion, culture, law, literature, and politics from the founding of the East India Company in 1600 to the Partition of India in 1947. Topics will include (but are not limited to) changes in the status and nature of Islamic law; impacts of new forms of travel and mobility on Muslim ritual life, especially the Hajj pilgrimage; new debates about the status and position of women in Muslim societies; reimagining the biography of the Prophet Muhammad in light of Orientalist critiques; the development of a quintessentially "Victorian" Islam in nineteenth century England; and reassessments of Muslim political thought in the context of nascent anticolonial movements in the early twentieth century.

Professor Brannon Ingram
W 3:00-5:30pm

REL 359-20 / MENA 390-5



THE IMPERIAL DURBAR.

"THE SEAT: ENTER INTO SEARS: THE VICEROY AND LADY: DUKER, THE MAJE, AND DUKER OF CONNOR: THE PAMARJA OF MYSON: THE WIRAN OF HYDERABAD, AND OTHER INDIAN PRINCES: PASSING THE DUMA MASJID ON DECEMBER 29TH 1902"

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?



Professor James Bielo

TTH 11:00-12:20pm

In this course, students will explore the religious, social, and political dimensions of Christian nationalist movements. We will consider the U.S. case in historical and ethnographic perspective, and contextualize it amid global comparative examples.

The course counts towards the Religion, Law, and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentration.

The Art of Rabbinic Narrative

Professor Barry Wimpfheimer

TTH 2-3:20pm



Rabbinic literature contains a large corpus of stories. In this course we will explore different methods of reading such stories. These range from naïve historiography to sophisticated historiography, from reading these stories as fables with didactic morals to reading them as windows onto a class-stratified and gender-divided rabbinic culture. Our analysis of these methods of reading rabbinic stories will be conducted in conversation with different twentieth century literary theorists.

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Chan/Zen Buddhism

REL 319-20 | Prof. Kevin Buckelew | MW 11-12:20pm



The Chinese Chan (Japanese Zen) Buddhist tradition is one of the most famous branches of Buddhism in the world, but also one of the most widely misunderstood. This course explores the history, literature, philosophy, visual culture, and monastic practices of Chan/Zen Buddhism in East Asia. We pay special attention to the ways Chan/Zen innovated within the Buddhist tradition to establish a uniquely East Asian school of Buddhism. Along the way we consider the changing place of meditation in Chan/Zen practice, closely read Chan/Zen sermons and kōans, analyze the role of women and gender in Chan and Zen, and conclude by considering the modern reception of Zen in the West.

RELIGION, MEDICINE & SUFFERING IN THE WEST

REL 173-20 | PROFESSOR ROBERT ORSI | MW 3:30-4:50PM



This course explores what religion(s), primarily Catholicism (although I will make references to other religious traditions as we go along), have made of the body-in-pain, what religion may offer to people in pain to assist them in understanding and living with their illness, and how religious people have used physical pain for specific ends, religious, social, and political. Central to the work of the course is understanding pain itself as a phenomenon and thinking about how culture generally, religion in particular, shapes the pain experience.

*This course counts toward Religion, Health and Medicine (RHM) religious studies major concentrations.

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY FROM 1865 TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Professor Robert Orsi | MW 12:30-1:50pm



This course examines major developments, movements, controversies, and figures in American religious history from the end of the Civil War, as the nation struggled to make sense of the carnage of war and to apportion responsibility, to the 1930s, when economic crisis strained social bonds and intimate relations and challenged Americans to rethink the nature of public responsibility. Topics include urban religion; religion and changing technologies; African American religion; religion and politics; and the religious practices of immigrants and migrants.

The course counts towards the Religion, Law, and Politics (RLP) religious studies major concentration.

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RELIGIOUS
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EXHIBITING RELIGION

REL 379-40 / AMER_ST 310-40

Professor James Bielo
TTH 2-3:20pm



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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REL 476-0-22 / MENA 411-0-1



Graduate Seminar: New Directions in Islamic Studies



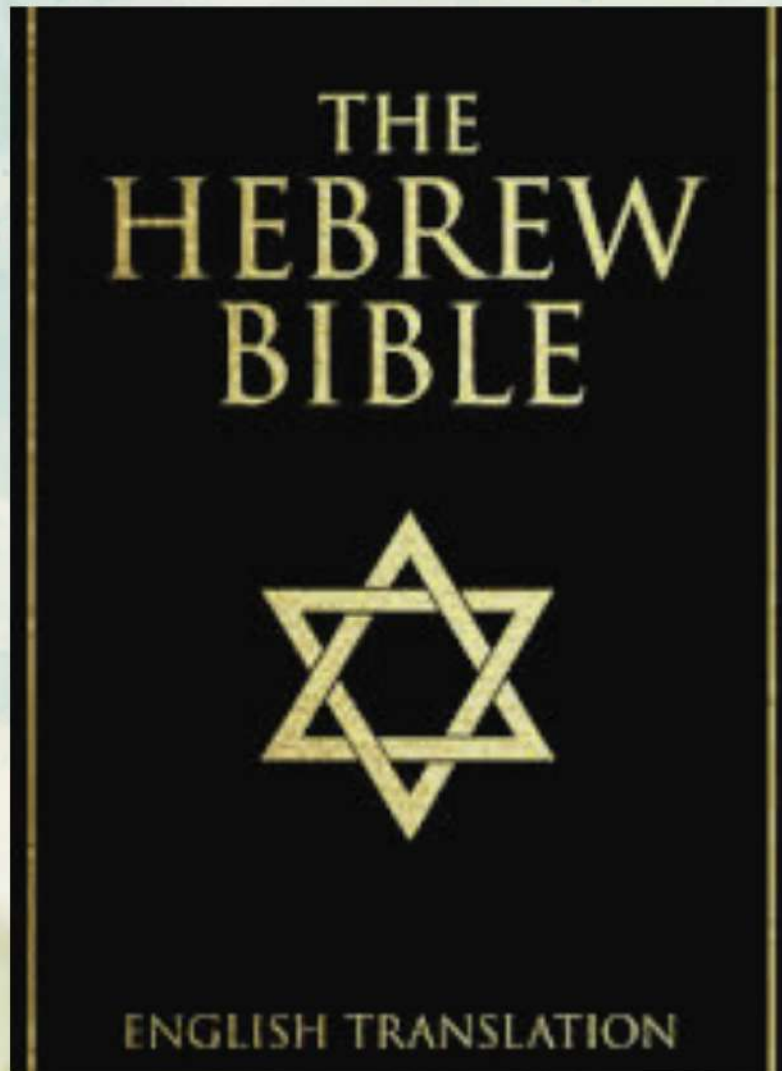
Professor Brannon Ingram
T 3:00-5:30pm

This course explores some of the most important developments in the academic study of Islam in the last two decades. The aim of this course is to give students a strong sense of where the field has recently been and where it is currently going. The course will be structured around five broad modules: Islam and critical studies of secularity; recent developments in theorizing Islamic law and statecraft; “decolonizing” Islamic studies and Quranic Studies; new approaches to understanding gender and sexuality; and studies of materiality, affect, and the senses in Muslim societies.

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW BIBLE

REL 220-1 / JWSH_ST 220-1

Professor Barry Wimpfheimer
TTH 9:30-10:50am



There is no understating the significance of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in Western Culture. The Bible is a text that has been repeatedly turned to for spiritual guidance, for explanations of mankind's origins and as the basis of both classical art and contemporary cinema. English idiom is peppered with phrases that originate in the Hebrew Bible and many a modern political clash can be understood as a conflict over what the Bible's messages and their implications. This course introduces students to the Hebrew Bible by reading sections of most of the Bible's books. But reading is itself a complicated enterprise. The Bible has been put to many different uses; even within the world of academic scholarship, the Bible is sometimes a source of history, sometimes a religious manual, sometimes a primitive legal code and sometimes a work of classical literature.

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Theories of Religion



REL 395-20 | Professor Sarah Taylor | TH 2-4:30pm



Are music festivals “religious” in nature? Imbued with ecstatic rituals and experiences of what Emil Durkheim called “collective effervescence” and William James termed “the more”? What makes an event like this “religious”? Or “secular”? Or perhaps both? Are Gen Zs experiencing “the more” in nontraditional settings and spaces? What does it mean when we say something is (or is not) “religious”? Let’s discuss! In creative ways, let’s think together about what counts or does not count as “religion”? How do we know? And who gets to decide? This course engages the thoughts and ideas of some of 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.

Designed for majors and minors in Religious Studies but all are welcome! Have a special talent and/or are passionate about a particular area of study? By all means, let’s integrate those things into your learning experience this term!