

Department of Religion  
Vassar College

## THE MAJORS' HANDBOOK

Academic Year 2022-2023

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## I. ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

In the Religion Department we consider in rigorous ways the most profound issues that human beings face, such as understanding suffering and pain, searching for an ethical life, building community with others, and finding meaning. The academic study of religion is an interdisciplinary exploration of these issues and of other phenomena we call “religious” around the world. Faculty in our department use historical methods to understand how religious communities and practices change over time; they delve deep into primary religious texts; they use comparative methods to analyze ritual, popular culture, race, gender, media, art, and material culture in different settings; and they employ sociological, psychological, and anthropological methods to study how religiosity and spirituality shape social and individual life. Our classes critically explore the complexities of religion around the globe, looking at how religion plays a key role in today’s urgent political and social problems.

The department’s goals for our students include: developing an awareness of and passion for their own educational projects; considering multiple perspectives on religious experience and practice; understanding how important religion is in culture and in particular in social and political movements; and reading deeply and writing and speaking clearly about religious thought and practice. We would like students to be conversant in a number of areas in the study of religion and to encounter religion as an unstable and capacious category.

Our department is active in many multidisciplinary programs. Members of the department participate in Asian Studies, Jewish Studies, Africana Studies, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, International Studies, Women’s Studies, American Studies, and STS. We do so with the understanding that the study of religion at its core is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary area of inquiry. Our department thus plays a critical role in Vassar’s liberal arts curriculum.

## II. REQUIREMENTS

**Requirements for the Major:** A minimum of 11 units, including Religion 200 and one Intensive. Two seminars are required (one 300-level course and the Senior Seminar, Religion 300). Students are required to take Religion 200 by the end of their junior year and it is highly recommended that they take this course 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 major, normally no more than two may be at the 100-level. However, students may petition for an additional 100-level course to be counted toward the major. No more than 1 unit of CEL and/or independent work courses may count toward the major. After declaring a major in Religion, no courses taken under the Non-Recorded Option

serve to fulfill the major 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 to do so, they must enroll in Religion 301 in the Spring of their senior year. The thesis option is a year-long undertaking and should develop the work begun in the Fall Senior Seminar (Reli 300). Only students who complete a thesis are eligible for departmental honors. Students in Reli 300, the Senior Seminar, receive a letter grade. Students writing a thesis receive a grade of either 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 in total, typically as follows: 1 unit at the 100-level, 3 units at the 200-level, 1 unit at the 300-level, and 1 unit of Intensive. After declaring a correlate sequence in Religion, no courses taken under the Non-Recorded Option serve to fulfill these requirements.

#### **Religion 200b: Regarding Religion**

This course is a full unit, graded course offered every B semester. 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 both an exploration of critical issues in the study of Religion and a collaborative writing workshop. The seminar culminates in a 25-page independent research paper on a topic of the student's choosing. During the semester, students will present their research and writing to the 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 MAJOR

Step 1: Meet with the Chair of the Religion Department and consult about your academic plans. In this meeting you will also discuss potential academic advisors.

Step 2: Go to the Registrar's website and click on the appropriate Major Declaration form. After you fill out and electronically submit this form it will be routed to the department chair and your advisor in Religion. They will electronically approve your form and you'll be a major.

It is a good idea at this stage to plan how you will satisfy all major and college requirements. Feel free to discuss this with your advisor or the Religion chair.

NOTE FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS ONLY: Go see your pre-major advisor, who also must sign your Declaration of Major form.

### IV. THE ADVISOR

You will consult with the Religion department chair about getting an advisor. The chair will seek your input, but she/he will ultimately assign an advisor for you based on your interests and on faculty availability. While it is sometimes useful to have an advisor whose work is close to your own interests, all faculty members in the department are qualified to serve as major advisors.

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 for pre-registration. Other than that, you can 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 an argument or idea that is important to you and that you have, usually through coursework, 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, independent project.

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 of your senior year.

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 happens 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 you 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 poorly-argued 80-page thesis.

**Choosing Your Topic.** Make sure that your topic is something you will enjoy focusing on. The Senior Seminar plays an important role in this regard. You will spend a great deal of time with whatever subject you select, and your passion

for your topic will sustain you through the drearier aspects of the project (every project has them). 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 first submit a “thesis petition” in the Fall of your senior year. Look in the Thesis Handbook for the precise due date. Please also see the Thesis Handbook for a copy of the petition.

## VI. COURSE CREDIT POLICY

The Religion Department requires 11 units for the major, including reli 200, one Intensive, reli 300, and one additional seminar at the 300-level. Of the 11 units required for the major, 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 major.

### 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 CEL

No more than 1 unit of CEL (Community Engaged Learning), independent work, and/or reading courses may count toward the major. 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.

### **Community Engaged Learning**

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

### **Independent Work and Reading Courses**

If you are particularly interested in a topic and there are no courses in our catalogue that examine that topic you can 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 can complete over one semester, culminating in a final paper. Your major advisor need not be the faculty member sponsoring your independent work. 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 CEL, 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 with your class syllabi, all graded work, and any other supporting materials that might help your petition. The Chair then distributes this information to the religion faculty and the entire faculty determines whether or not credit is given.

### Non-Recorded Option

After a Religion major has declared, no further courses taken under the Non-Recorded 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 spend 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 the sophomore year, but it is never too early to begin researching JYA 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 it is best not to leave this until the last minute.

Vassar sponsors several abroad programs and approves numerous other programs all over the world. Although no program is sponsored by the Religion Department, credits can be transferred and approved through an application process. See the 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 Office of International Programs (<https://internationalprograms.vassar.edu>) and the Department Chair in advance to determine the college's policy with regard to your particular program. Often credits but not grades will transfer from abroad programs.

## VIII. THE MAJOR'S COMMITTEE, HONORS & PRIZES

### Majors Committee

The Religion Department Majors Committee works as a liaison between the religion majors, correlates, and the faculty. Working with the Religion Department intern, the Majors Committee organizes events for students and faculty, and provides information for prospective majors.

### 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. 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 also 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 as category and practice is a fundamental part of any society, and the tools you learn in the Department will help you understand the worlds you live in—near and far—that much better.

## X. FACULTY

Marc Michael Epstein, Professor on the Mackie M. Paschall Davis and Norman H. Davis Chair and Director of Jewish Studies: 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.

Jonathon Kahn, 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.

Agnes Veto, Adjunct Assistant Professor: A.B., Eotvos Lorand University, M.A. Hebrew University, M.A., Ph.D. New York University. Ágnes (Ági) Veto grew up in Budapest, where she undertook the study of Hebrew and Aramaic, and earned an undergraduate degree in Biblical and Jewish Studies from Eotvos Lorand University. She received an advanced degree in Jewish Studies from the London University School of Oriental and African Studies and spent a year at Oxford Postgraduate Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. She spent two years in Paris at the Sorbonne, at both the Institute Catholique and École Practique Des Hauts Études, as student, translator and teacher of English, and has studied Talmud at the Pardes Institute, a co-educational yeshivah in Jerusalem. Ms. Veto earned an M.A. in Jewish Studies at the Rothberg Graduate

School of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and an M.A. and Ph.D. at New York University, where she focused on Talmud and Rabbinic literature.

**Michael J. Walsh, Professor:** B.Soc.Sci., University of Cape Town; M.A., Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara. Michael Walsh teaches courses on the cultural history of the study of religion, China's political and socioreligious culture, methods and theories in the study of religion, Buddhism and monastic life, colonialism and religion, violence and religion, and the production of sacred space and cultural geography.

**Kirsten Wesselhoeft, Assistant Professor:** B.A. Willamette University; MTS Harvard Divinity School; A. M., Ph.D. Harvard University. Kirsten Wesselhoeft teaches courses on Islamic studies, religion and the social sciences, Muslim ethics, and gender and religion. In her research she uses ethnographic methods to study European Muslims and their characteristic forms of education, community building and social activism.

**Christopher White, Professor & Chair:** A.B., University of California, Davis; M.T.S., Harvard Divinity School; A.M., Ph.D., Harvard University. Christopher White teaches courses on science, technology, media, religion, spirituality & pop culture in the modern U.S.

**Klaus Yoder, Adjunct Assistant Professor:** B.A. Ursinus College, Th.D., Harvard University. Klaus Yoder teaches and writes about the history of Christian theology, spirituality and ethics. In preparation for writing his dissertation, he spent a year in Germany examining sixteenth-century primary sources as a guest student at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. His research explores how Christians during and after the Protestant Reformation developed new insights about performance, rhetoric, the body and worship practices.

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