

# COMMITTEES AND AREAS OF STUDY

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## Committees of the Faculty and Areas of Study

Work at the Divinity School encompasses the full range of the academic study of religion. The School's faculty are organized in 4 committees and 11 areas of study.

### Committees of the Faculty

- **Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion**

The Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion brings together faculty and students whose work aims to articulate, interpret, and assess the claims of religious traditions and communities, and based on such work, make normative claims about how religious convictions can orient human thought, belief, and practice. In the Divinity School, constructive work draws on the resources of the modern university to develop critical interpretations of religious traditions' self-understandings of their meaning, truth, and value; conceptual inquiries into philosophical issues arising from religious beliefs and practices; ethical inquiries into matters of religion, value, and human well-being; and political inquiries into religion's relationship to social life, justice, and public culture. Potential topics of investigation include cosmology and metaphysics, law and virtue, religion and science, dualism and non-dualism, freedom and finitude, power and authority, religion and material culture, and time and eternity, along with contemporary concerns surrounding race, sex and gender, disability, environmental warfare, and religion and secularism, for example. Such scholarly investigations can address challenges that arise in various contexts, in the academy and beyond.

Students working in Constructive Studies in Religion, regardless of their specialization, are expected to develop a deeply historical and interdisciplinary understanding of the questions and problems they seek to address. Work in Constructive Studies in Religion thus aims to engage and expand upon religious traditions' own normative accounts of meaning, truth, and value by situating them within a broad matrix of scholarly inquiry and creative, critical reflection. That matrix brings together resources in theology, philosophy, ethics, and political theory, as well as related intellectual practices—viewing these not as insoluble specializations but as having the potential to mutually and dynamically inform each other for constructive work in the field. In these ways, scholarship in Constructive Studies in Religion aims to engage and enlarge religious traditions' own normative accounts of meaning, truth, and value, considering them as historical materials requiring interpretation and ask potentially relevant to human flourishing. The Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion embodies the recognition that normative, critical engagement with these tools and archives is significant not only for the particularly scholarly feels the Committee comprises, but for more generally for understanding the place of religious traditions in relations to the human good and public life

- **Committee on Historical Studies in Religion**

The Committee on Historical Studies in Religion comprises faculty and students from different areas who study religious communities, traditions, beliefs, practices, texts, and material artifacts from the past. The Historical Studies Committee is grounded in its study of the past, but its diverse scholars draw upon multiple disciplines in order to understand and make sense of religions and their varied and situated cultural, social, political, economic, and material histories. Though no singular methodological approach prevails, historians engage other fields of study to attempt to reconstruct and explain the patterns, practices, rituals, and beliefs of religious traditions from past societies, peoples, and geographies.

Historical inquiry investigates questions about continuity and discontinuity in the past, the creation, dissemination, and meaning of religious texts, and philological and literary investigations. This inquiry may also extend to inter-religious encounters, the formation and changing of fortunes of religious institutions, identities, and communities across space and time. These topics intersect in complex ways with religion and class, race, gender, and sexuality. Historians engaged in the study of religion acknowledge the distinctness of the past, although their work of reconstruction and representation may also provide critical tools for is constructive retrieval of current projects.

Scholars in Historical Studies seek to understand how the present and its methodological controversies, its approaches to the past, and its contemporary concerns inform our study of religions and their divergent and particular histories. A principal aim of the Historical Studies Committee is to train students in the identification and use of primary sources (e.g., texts, oral histories, and material artifacts), the relative merits of different theoretical models of historical interpretation of religious traditions, and the requisite philological and language skills to study and interpret specific religious traditions.

- **Committee on Literature, Media, and Cultural Studies**

The Committee on Literary, Media, and Cultural Studies convenes faculty and students whose research illuminates the mutual relationship between meaning and form in the creation and transformation of religious worlds. Our research explores the performative and expressive arts and their religious impacts on social and political spheres. We attend to the complexities of production, reception, and interpretation within particular

historical contexts and traditions. We see the role of rhetoric and representation as a central aspect of literary and cultural production.

Topics of study range widely, including the history of translation, the role of media in the making of cultural systems, the relationship between technology, communication, and material practice, the fictive arts as a site of religious thought, and the dynamics and problems of canonization and the canon. Insight from theories of poetics and aesthetics inform our methods of inquiry. We interrogate the effects of literature and media on and within social hierarchies such as race, gender, and class.

- **The Committee on Social and Cultural Sciences of Religion**

The Committee on Social and Cultural Sciences of Religion brings together scholars from several disciplines engaged in empirical research on religious discourses and practices embedded in the broader fabric of human life. Social and Cultural Sciences of Religion faculty and students situate their studies in specific historical periods, regional contexts, or transregional formations connected by movements of ideas, objects, and people. They ask questions like: How is religious authority produced and sustained? How do beliefs negotiate their faith commitments in relation to ethnic, sexual, and other kinds of identity? What role do rituals play in formation of community? How do practitioners navigate tensions between ethics and politics? What role has colonialism and the modern state played in remaking religious knowledge and practice? In pursuing these and other questions, faculty and students produce detailed descriptions as the basis for analysis and comparison. While their work is situated within a diverse range of disciplinary frameworks (anthropology, history, political thought, sociology, ethical theory) methods (ethnography, philology, archival research), and modes of inquiry (semiotics, genealogical analysis, social thought and history, cultural interpretation), they are unified by a commitment to forming and redefining concepts that transcend local particularities. As such, some studies may give rise to generalizations about religion across societies, cultures, and historical periods, while others will sharpen how religion is understood as a second-order category of interpretation and analysis

#### **Areas of Study**

- **Anthropology and Sociology of Religion**

Anthropology and Sociology of Religion examines religious phenomena as social facts and cultural processes, using a combination of tools including fieldwork, archival research, and textual interpretation. Anthropology and sociology have long served as core disciplines of the social sciences, and social scientific work on religion has been foundational for our current theorizations of culture, society, personhood, language, knowledge, and economy. Promoting critical inquiry of what is regarded as 'religion,' anthropologists and sociologists are attendant to the categories and politics of analysis, beginning from the everyday contexts of discourse and practice that make collective institutions and competing horizons of authority possible.

The ASR Area at the Divinity School is committed to qualitative ethnographic fieldwork, serious linguistic training, and historically sensitive research. Core faculty are experts in contemporary Islam and Christianity, with geographic specialties in the Middle East and East Asia. The Area maintains a particular focus on the following topics in the comparative study of religion worldwide:

- Epistemology and philosophy of knowledge
- Media and materiality
- Political economy, authority, governance
- Colonialism, nationalism, globalization
- **Bible**

The Bible Area seeks to understand and interpret the Jewish and Christian scriptures and related texts in their historical and cultural settings as well as their subsequent roles as canonical texts for Judaism and Christianity. Contributing to these goals are four distinct Areas of research: the historical contexts of these scriptures from ancient Israel to the Roman Empire, the history and transmission of biblical and post-biblical literature, the history and methods of exegesis, and biblical and post-biblical theology.

- **History of Christianity**

The History of Christianity Area focuses on one major western religious tradition, in itself and its interactions with other religions and cultures across time. The Area fosters knowledge of the range of communities claiming an identity as "Christian" from the first through the twenty-first centuries, as well as allowing for individual specialization in a particular movement or historical movement, including ancient Christianity (to Constantine), late antique and medieval Christianity, the Reformation and early modernity, the Puritan movement, and American Christianity and American religion in general.

Coursework and guided research emphasize the acquisition of essential skills in documentary and artifactual interpretation, critical appraisal of a range of methodological approaches to the material, and a sophisticated appreciation of the tasks, goals and audiences of historiographical writing. The construction of this Area is based on the assumption that there are major issues that apply and extend to all periods (such as forms of biblical interpretation, means of adjudicating "orthodoxy" and "heresy," the relationship between

Christian communities and the social order, forms of institutional and personal piety), as well as particular expressions of those dynamics in different chronological and geographical settings. It also assumes the need for integration of intellectual, social, institutional and cultural histories for interpreting the body of existing evidence and adequately addressing most important questions about this particular religious tradition in its various manifestations.

- **History of Judaism**

The History of Judaism Area concentrates on Jewish thought, from antiquity to present. Midrash and piyyut, biblical interpretation and belles-lettres, Sufism and Kabbalah, philosophy and theology—these are the main subjects that we explore, in historical and hermeneutical context. The main focus is textual, the study of ideas as they emerge in the vast and varied literary production of the Jews throughout time.

Although students are required to gain expertise in one historical period and geographical realm, they are encouraged to acquire a sense of the development of ideas through the areas, from Biblical to Second Temple, Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism, into the Medieval period—in the Islamic world and Christian Europe—into Modern times, in Germany, France, Italy, Israel, and America.

- **History of Religions.**

The History of Religions Area approaches religion as an exclusively human phenomenon, via the methods of social sciences and the humanities. The Area is concerned to theorize at a high level of generalization, informed by broadly comparative and empirical research, and to carry out high-level empirical research informed by theoretical reflection. It pays self-conscious and explicit attention to problems of epistemology, terminology, category formation, method and motive. Irreverent by temperament and sometimes on principle, it insists that:

1. The Western monotheisms should not be the only paradigms and/or objects of legitimate study,
2. Religion cannot be reduced to belief, but also includes issues of practices, institutions, communities, habitus and other factors that often operate below the level of consciousness, and
3. Interpretation involves critical probing and systematic interrogation of the idealized self-representations of any religious phenomenon.

Those who work within the History of Religions are expected to become thoroughly acquainted with the development of the History of Religions as an academic discipline, and to have a sophisticated understanding of the theories and methods that are relevant to contemporary research in the field. Each student must deal creatively with the tension that results from an emphasis on the importance of historically contextualized studies on the one hand, and of wide-ranging theoretical and comparative research on the other.

Students in the History of Religions develop a special expertise in the study of at least one particular religious tradition. This involves learning to read and/or speak the relevant language (or languages) and becoming familiar with the relevant historical and cultural background. In addition, each student is expected to become informed about a variety of other religious traditions, both historical and contemporary.

- **Islamic Studies**

The Islamic Studies Area engages in the study of Islam as a textual tradition inscribed in history and particular cultural contexts. The Area seeks to provide an introduction to and specialization in Islam through a large variety of expressions (literary, poetic, social, and political), and through a variety of methods (literary criticism, hermeneutics, history, sociology, and anthropology). The Area offers opportunities to specialize in fields that include Qur'anic Studies, Sufi Literature, Islamic Law and Theology, and Islamic Philosophy.

- **Philosophy of Religions**

The Philosophy of Religions Area considers philosophical issues arising from various religious beliefs and practices, and from critical reflection upon them. Work in this Area requires historical understanding of the discipline as it developed in the West, but students also specialize in the philosophical thought of a non-Western religious tradition, as well as do constructive philosophical work that draws upon the resources of more than one tradition.

- **Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture**

The Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture Area studies the interactions of the religions with cultural forms and practices, with particular reference to art. It pursues this study utilizing the tools of poetics, aesthetics, and theories of interpretation to understand both the ways that the religions harness the human imagination, and the ways that the human recourse to imaginative expression, often, some would say always-engages religion.

The Divinity School's program in Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture represents the oldest and longest-standing program of its kind in the country. Created by Preston Roberts and consolidated under the leadership of Nathan Scott under the title "Theology and Literature," the program became "Religion and Literature" in the 1960s and retained that name while extending its ambit to include comparative study, literary theory (including hermeneutics and aesthetics), and the boundaries between literature and other aesthetic and critical human

endeavors. Its most recent change in name reflects the appointment of colleagues in art history, and growing interest among faculty and students in that field but also in cinema studies. Throughout its history the program has always been and remains today resolutely engaged with both other Areas of study in the Divinity School and other divisions and departments of the University. Put prosaically: while the program presses the crucial question of the “and” in the Area’s title, it predicates no single formulation of the “and”.

The Area is concerned, in courses and examinations, with the historical background of the myriad intersections of religion, literature, and visual culture – a history that reflects both perennial issues in the world’s cultures, and the 20th-century academic discipline – and with the methods and theories that have been developed in exemplary critical and historical studies.

- **Religions in the Americas**

The Religions in the Americas Area is an interdisciplinary program that focuses on religious ideas, practices, institutions, and movements in colonial North America (1600-1787) and the United States (1787- present). The program is interdisciplinary, bringing together faculty and students with historical, sociological, ethnographic, comparative, and theoretical interests in American religion.

The University of Chicago has been committed to the study of religions in America since 1927, when it became the first university in the nation to create a professorship in the “history of American Christianity,” a position originally held by William Warren Sweet (1881-1959). Sweet was committed to studying American religion in relationship to its social, political, and economic contexts. The distinguished scholars who followed him, including Sidney Mead, Jerald C. Brauer, W. Clark Gilpin and Martin E. Marty, echoed his critical approach and also broadened the study of American religion at the Divinity School to encompass the full range of religious traditions practiced in the United States.

Religions in the Americas stands at the crossroads of several other Areas of study at the Divinity School, and interdisciplinary collaboration is expected. Students who are particularly interested in American Christianity have the choice of concentrating in either Religions in the Americas or the History of Christianity Area in the Divinity School, which considers American Christianity in relationship to the longer Christian tradition from antiquity to the present. Similarly, students who are interested in other global traditions in America (for example, Buddhism or Hinduism), can choose to concentrate in either Religions in America or the History of Religions Area.

- **Religious Ethics**

The Religious Ethics Area is concerned with the meaning, merits, and validity of religion for the lives of human and non-human animals and the ordering of societies and ecosystems. As such, the Area addresses problems of the good life, justice, and the common good. Study in the history, methods, and theories of religious and non-religious ethics is essential to work in the Area.

- **Theology**

The Theology Area is concerned with the historical study of the self-understanding of a religious tradition, mainly Christianity and Judaism, and with the constructive interpretation of its meaning and truth for the contemporary world.

Students in Theology must, thereby, address questions of the history of theology, the definitive characteristics of theological claims and discourse, the criteria of meaning and of truth within a tradition, methods of theological reflection, the warrant (if any) for revision within traditions, and the manifold ways to answer or to sustain the criticism of theological ideas and religious beliefs. Students in Theology thereby demonstrate their historical competence, methodological sophistication, and also grounding in some specific form of theological reflection.

