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.

Faculty: Daniel A. Arnold, Ryan Coyne, Kristine A. Culp, Arnold I. Davidson, Michael Fishbane, Sarah E. Fredericks, Kevin Hector, Dwight N. Hopkins, Matthew Kapstein, Jean-Luc Marion, Francoise Meltzer, Richard B. Miller, Willemien Otten, William Schweiker, Brook A. Ziporyn, Laurie Zoloth

- 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.
Committees of the Faculty and Areas of Study

**Faculty:** Yousef Casewit, Alireza Doostdar, Jas Elsner, Curtis J. Evans, Michael Fishbane, Karin Krause, David Martinez, Margaret M. Mitchell, Willemien Otten, James T. Robinson, Jeffrey Stackert, Erin Galgay Walsh

- **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.

  **Faculty:** Alireza Doostdar, Sarah Hammerschlag, Angie Heo, Matthew Kapstein, Francoise Meltzer, James T. Robinson, Richard A. Rosengarten, Christian K. Wedemeyer

- **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 believers 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.

  **Faculty:** Alireza Doostdar, Sarah Hammerschlag, Angie Heo, Matthew Kapstein, Francoise Meltzer, James T. Robinson, Richard A. Rosengarten, Christian K. Wedemeyer

**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

  **Faculty:** Alireza Doostdar, Angie Heo, Hussain Ali Agrama (Associated), Julie Chu (Associated), William T.S. Mazzarella (Associated), Omar M. McRoberts (Associated), Stephan Palmie (Associated), Jenny Trinitapoli (Associated), Mareike Winchell (Associated)

- **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.

- Simeon Chavel, Jas Elsner, Michael Fishbane, David Martinez, Margaret M. Mitchell, Jeffrey Stackert, Erin Galgay Walsh, J. David Scloen (Associated), Sofia Torallas Tovar (Associated)

- 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.

- Curtis J. Evans, Karin Krause, Margaret M. Mitchell, Willemien Otten

- 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.

- Simeon Chavel, Arnold I. Davidson, Michael Fishbane, Sarah Hammerschlag, David Nirenberg, James T. Robinson

- 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.

Faculty: Matthew Kapstein, Anand Venkatkrishnan, Christian Wedemeyer, Paul Copp (Associated), Christopher Farone (Associated), James Ketalaar (Associated), Gary Tubb (Associated)
Elites and religious leaders have long been influential in the formation of religious identities and the development of religious practices. However, it is important to consider how these religious leaders interacted with each other and how their ideas were disseminated throughout their communities. For example, in medieval Europe, the Catholic Church played a significant role in shaping religious beliefs and practices. The Church's leaders, such as the Pope and bishops, had considerable power and influence over religious matters. They established a system of hierarchical control that allowed them to enforce their teachings and suppress dissenting voices. However, this hierarchical system also created a dynamic in which religious leaders had to balance their power with the need to maintain the support of the faithful. As a result, religious leaders had to be skilled in both rhetoric and diplomacy, and they often had to navigate delicate political and social landscapes.

As religious leaders began to expand their influence beyond their own communities, they encountered new challenges. For example, the spread of Islam during the medieval period led to conflicts between Muslim leaders and local religious elites in regions where Islam was in competition with other religious traditions. In such situations, religious leaders had to find ways to reconcile their own religious beliefs with those of other groups, and they often did so through a process of dialogue and compromise. This approach allowed religious leaders to maintain their authority while also promoting religious pluralism and tolerance.

In conclusion, religious leaders have played a crucial role in shaping religious identities and practices throughout history. Their actions and decisions have had a profound impact on the development of religious traditions and have shaped the cultural and political landscape of the world. By understanding the role of religious leaders in shaping religious identities, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities and richness of religious traditions.
Committees of the Faculty and Areas of Study

Faculty: Curtis J. Evans, William Schultz, Omar McRoberts (Associated), Eric Slauter (Associated)

• 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.

• Sarah E. Fredericks, Richard B. Miller, William Schweiker, Laurie Zoloth, Stephen C. Meredith (Associated), Martha C. Nussbaum (Associated)

• 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.

• Ryan Coyne, Kristine A. Culp, Kevin Hector, Dwight N. Hopkins, Jean-Luc Marion, Willemien Otten, William Schweiker