

Religion, Society and Culture

Faculty

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Program Overview

The study of religion has been a foundational part of Bishop's University's mission since the institution's establishment in the mid-19th century. At that time, the focus was primarily on Christianity. Today, as a department in the Humanities division, we offer a broad range of courses covering the major world religions and examining religion from a number of perspectives.

For many years, we operated under the name "Department of Religion". In 2021, it was decided to shift that to "Department of Religion, Society and Culture". These three phenomena—"religion", "society", "culture"—have always been overlapping and interpenetrating. Our name change is intended to reflect that fact, and to clarify the academic approach of the Department. Our objective is to further the understanding of religion in an overall sense; we do not aim to make value judgments about its legitimacy, but to examine how it has informed human existence.

The Department offers courses in three major categories. "Biblical Studies" invites students to become familiar with the sacred texts of the Jewish and Christian traditions, to investigate the historical and cultural contexts of their origins and development, and to acquaint themselves with the critical, analytical, theoretical and historical tools for inquiry into these texts. "World Religions" courses offer a knowledge of the sacred texts, traditions, rituals, beliefs and practices of the major religions, which have elicited devotion from persons in every time and place for millennia. Finally, the courses in "Approaches, Perspectives and Expressions"—the third, and largest, category—give most explicit articulation to the reality that religion does not exist in a vacuum. As emphasized above, it is linked to myriad aspects of society and culture, including philosophical thought, psychological, social, political and economic dimensions, the issue of human mortality, fine arts, literature and sports.

Because religions have significantly influenced, and been influenced by, the political, artistic, intellectual, social and economic life of cultures throughout history, the academic study of religion is an interdisciplinary pursuit. Students taking an Honours or Major in Religion, Society and Culture are encouraged to take courses in other, related fields and, conversely, students in other disciplines are welcomed in Religion, Society and Culture courses in order to round out their understanding of their areas of concentration.

Students planning on entering professions such as education, social work, law, theatre, music, business, etc. may pursue courses in Religion, Society and Culture in order to enhance their vocational and personal lives. (The study of religion may also, of course, be in preparation for some form of ministry.)

Programs

Honours in Religion, Society and Culture (60 credits)

HONRSC

Students must keep an average of at least 70% as calculated from the best 60 credits in the program (including cognates). Students have the option of writing an Honours thesis in their final year. Students usually take the Honours program if they plan to pursue graduate work. See the Major in Religion, Society and Culture below.

Major in Religion, Society and Culture (42 credits)

MAJRSC

Honours and Majors are also required to fulfill the following minimum distribution requirements (30 credits; see the course lists for course descriptions):

Biblical Studies: 6 credits from: RSC 112, RSC 114, RSC 115, RSC 135, RSC 214, RSC 215, RSC 328

World Religions: 12 credits, including RSC 100 and RSC 101, plus 6 credits from: RSC 124, RSC 125, RSC 126, RSC 127

Approaches, Perspectives and Expressions: Any 12 credits

Minor in Religion, Society and Culture (24 credits)

MINRSC

Any 24 credits in Religion, Society and Culture

List of Courses

Biblical Studies

RSC 112 From Mythology to History: Biblical Israel and its World 3-3-0

An exploration of the world of the ancient Israelites, the forerunners of the Jewish people. Material from selected books of the Hebrew Bible (also called the Old Testament) will be combined with archaeological data and evidence from inscriptions to situate Israelite civilization within the socio-cultural context of the wider ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds.

RSC 114 Biblical Hebrew I 3-3-0
Introduction to biblical Hebrew grammar, and reading of simple texts.

RSC 115 Biblical Hebrew II 3-3-0
More advanced biblical Hebrew grammatical concepts, and study of more challenging texts.

RSC 135 Jesus and His World 3-3-0

How did Jesus the Jew come to be known as Jesus Christ? What was the Graeco-Roman world that birthed the first-century Jewish sect that became Christianity like? Through an analysis of various New Testament documents and other early Christian writings, this course will focus on the social, historical and political context of the Graeco-Roman world that gave rise to Christianity.

RSC 214 Israelite Mythology and Cultic Practice 3-3-0

An examination of mythology and cultic practices within Israelite society, as reflected in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Extra-biblical texts and archaeological evidence will be used to contextualize the biblical material. Topics include: the origins of the Israelite deity Yahweh; monotheism and polytheism; goddess worship; child sacrifice.

RSC 215 Fake News? History vs. Legend in the Narrative of Early Biblical Israel 3-3-0

An examination of historical accounts concerning the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), with a view to assessing their historical authenticity. Extra-biblical texts and archaeological evidence will be used to contextualize the biblical material and to evaluate its claims. Topics include: the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob); Joseph in Egypt; the Exodus; the Israelite settlement in Canaan; the supposed "United Monarchy" under David and Solomon; David and Goliath.

RSC 247 Study Tour of Biblical Israel 6-3-0

This six-credit course explores the historical, archaeological and cultural contexts of the origin and development of the Jewish and Christian traditions. After preliminary lectures on campus, students will spend 10-12 days travelling in Israel and visiting the major archaeological sites pertinent to Judaism (and its precursor ancient Israelite religion) and Christianity.

RSC 311 Advanced Study in Biblical Texts 3-3-0

This course closely examines selected biblical texts with special reference to context and (re)interpretation.

RSC 328 Christian Origins 3-3-0

This course explores a variety of early Christian and Jewish texts to understand the existence of different Christianities in the first four centuries of the Common Era and the complex relationship between Jews and Christians within the broader historical context of the Roman Empire. Possible topics to be discussed include: How did Christianity become its own religion, separate from Judaism? What did Christians believe about Jesus and about their own identity in the formative period of Christianity? What social and cultural forces forged the earliest images of Jesus? *Prerequisite: RSC 135 or permission of the instructor*

World Religions

RSC 100 Middle Eastern Matrix: Religions of the West 3-3-0

An introduction to the "Western" religious traditions (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), which all began in the Middle East. In addition to addressing the historical evolution, religious practices, writings, fundamental concepts, beliefs and cultural expressions of each of these traditions, the course will also consider methodological issues pertaining to the study of religion as an academic discipline.

RSC 101 Asian Origins: Religions of the East 3-3-0

An introduction to Asian religious traditions, historically called "Eastern" (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shinto). In addition to concepts, beliefs and cultural expressions of each of these traditions, the course will also consider methodological issues pertaining to the study of religion as an academic discipline.

RSC 110 / CLA 112 Ancient Greek Mythology 3-3-0

The origin and development of Greek mythology, and the importance of myths in understanding ancient literature and religion: theories of myth, cult and ritual, mystery religions, the epic tradition. Greek sources are read in translation.

RSC 124 Hinduism: The Many Faces of the Divine 3-3-0

A study of Hinduism in its infinite variety from earliest times to the present. Topics include: the Indus Valley Civilization; early Vedic religion, its myths and gods; the Upanishads; Brahmanism; the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; the caste system; Vaishnavism, Saivism and goddess worship.

RSC 125 Buddhism: The Middle Way 3-3-0

The origins of Buddhism in its native India and its spread throughout many countries of the East. Topics include: the relationship of Buddhism to Hinduism and Jainism; the development of the monastic order, principal teachings and practices; meditation; ritual; study of major writings and modern developments.

RSC 126 Judaism: A Covenant with God 3-3-0

An introduction to the history, literature, ideas and practices of Judaism from its biblical origins to the present. Topics include: the major festivals and High Holidays; Torah and Talmud, mitzvah and midrash; philosophers of Judaism; Kabbalah and the mystical tradition; temples and synagogues; Rabbinic Judaism; Orthodox, Conservative and Reform; dietary and religious practices; women and the rabbinate; rites of passage; the Holocaust; the modern state of Israel and messianism.

RSC 127 Islam: Submission to Allah 3-3-0

The history, literature, ideas and practices of Islam from its origins to the present. Topics include: pre-Islamic Arabia; the life, example and practices of the Prophet Muhammad; the Qur'an; the caliphate and the *ummah*; *sunnah* and *Hadith*; the Five Pillars and worship; *Shari'ah*; Sufism and the mystical tradition; Sunni and Shiite; women in Islam; art and architecture in Islam; Islam and modernity.

RSC 205 Indigenous Religious Traditions 3-3-0

This course will examine the kinds of religious experiences found among the indigenous peoples of the Americas, with a particular emphasis on the traditions of Canada's First Nations (for example, Cree, Iroquois, Mohawk) and Inuit. Beyond the Canadian landscape, possible topics will include the religious traditions of the Inca, Aztec, Maya and Lakota.

RSC 238 / CLA 238 Greece: Land of the Gods 6-3-0

This six-credit course examines the sacred art and architecture of ancient Greece from Mycenae to Byzantium on site in Greece. Offered in the Spring semester. After preliminary lectures on campus students will spend two weeks traveling to the major sacred sites of mainland Greece. Travel plans must be finalized by the middle of January prior to departure in May. Contact the Classics department for information.

American students on U.S. Federal aid cannot enrol in this course for credit. Open to first-year students. Instructor's permission required.

RSC 280 / CLA 280 Roman Religion 3-3-0

This course examines the religion of the ancient Roman people, following the traditions and changes from the 8th century BCE to the Imperial period. Roman religion was very different from the monotheistic religions with which many of us are familiar today, but it was also significantly different from the mythology of the ancient Greeks, despite the Romans' willingness to absorb and adapt the Greek myths. Topics to be studied in this course will include the Roman concept of divinity, beliefs about the dead, religious and cult ritual, senatorial and imperial control of religion, emperor worship, divination and prophesy, festivals, and Roman responses to the introduction of foreign religions.

Approaches, Perspectives and Expressions

RSC 148 Psychology of Religion 3-3-0

An introduction to major theoretical approaches to the psychological understanding of religion: pragmatism (William James), Psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson) and Humanism (Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow).

RSC 149 Sociology of Religion 3-3-0

An introduction to the understanding of religion as a social phenomenon: a discussion of the views of Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Peter Berger and Robert Bellah.

RSC 200 Politics and Religion 3-3-0

This course examines the intersection between extremist religious beliefs and political power, predominantly but not exclusively those cases in which violence and serious conflict have arisen. Topics include: radical Zionist settlers in the West Bank; Islamic theocracy in Iran; Christian nationalism in the United States; radical Islamist groups (e.g., the Taliban, the Islamic State [ISIS] and Al Qaeda).

RSC 203 / CLA 206 Early Christian Art and Architecture 3-3-0

This course examines the ways in which the Christians adapted elements from Greek, Roman and Near Eastern art and architecture to their religious beliefs and requirements and also studies the development of this new Christian art in the Byzantine Empire. Major topics include: Catacomb art, early Christian and Byzantine architecture, mosaic and painting, manuscript illuminations, textiles and the minor arts.

RSC 204 / CLA 204 Women in Religion 3-3-0

An investigation of the religious lives of early pagan, Jewish and Christian women in the context of the Graeco-Roman world. Literary and epigraphical sources from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE are analyzed in order to determine women's roles, rites and practices, with special attention to constructions of gender in the Graeco-Roman world.

RSC 206 Apocalypse 3-3-0

It's the End of the World as We Know It... Whereas cosmic time in Eastern religious traditions is generally seen as cyclical, with recurring phases of creation and destruction, in Western-based religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam it is viewed as linear, with a single creation and a final destruction of this

present world – the apocalypse. This course will look at the sacred texts that underpin apocalyptic concepts in established Western religions (e.g., the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation), and examine how apocalyptic beliefs have been given expression in these traditions. Consideration will also be given to End Time beliefs in more recent “apocalyptic” movements (e.g., Heaven’s Gate and the Branch Davidians).

RSC 207 Sex and Religion 3-3-0

This course provides an overview of topics in which issues of sex and sexuality intersect with particular Eastern and Western religious traditions. The course is selective rather than comprehensive. Topics that could be covered include: menstruation and early sexuality; heterosexuality; contraception; LGBTQ+, same-sex marriage; celibacy; asexuality; sex and the sacred. Attitudes, traditions and regulations pertaining to these topics will be explored from various religious perspectives through readings and films/movies.

RSC 208 / LIB 216 The Divine and Ultimate Concern 3-3-0

The divine is that about which we are “ultimately concerned”—so said theologian Paul Tillich of Union Seminary in New York. Is this just a last-ditch attempt to salvage faith and spirituality in the midst of charges that religion is, at best, an “opiate of the masses” (Marx) and, at worst, “patently infantile” (Freud)? Or again, is the role of religion being taken over by its longtime sister in spirit—art? This course will explore the troubled and passionate place of religious experience and the aesthetic in Western civilization.

RSC 209 Sports and Religion 3-3-0

This course examines the intersection between sports and religious mentality and expression. Topics will include the rituals associated with athletics, supposed sports courses, prayer in sports, the possible transcendent experience of the athlete (“flow”) and the euphoria of fandom (“collective effervescence”).

RSC 232 Philosophy of Religion 3-3-0

Does the intelligibility of the universe require a notion of the divine? Does philosophy point in the direction of mysticism? Is there a close link between the metaphysics of religious experience and moral commitments such as love, faith and courage? In this course, we will explore the ongoing and lively debate about these issues by drawing on authors from the ancient, medieval and contemporary contexts.

RSC 234 / POL 236 Introduction to Middle Eastern Politics 3-3-0

The course will focus on the forces that have shaped current Middle Eastern politics: particularly the growing influence of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism on political life and thought; the enduring legacies of westernization, colonialism and secular nationalism; and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arriving at an understanding of Middle Eastern politics in this course will also entail study of the challenges modernizing states, parties and leaders are confronting today, and the profound impact of Western interests and policies on the region.

RSC 236 / CLA 236 Death and Dying in the Ancient World 3-3-0

This course explores the myths, rituals and beliefs associated with death and dying in antiquity. Topics include: myths associated with the afterlife; books of the dead; magic and death rituals; understandings of heaven and hell; final judgment.

RSC 237 Religion at the Movies 3-3-0

This course employs movies to study religion, and religion to study movies. Different movie genres will be used to explore various issues, dimensions and expressions of religion, while images, metaphors and teachings found in religion will be employed to illuminate the religious material portrayed in movies.

RSC 248 Death and Dying in the Modern World 3-3-0

This course explores the myths, rituals and beliefs associated with death and dying in the modern world. Topics include how death and dying are dealt with by contemporary cultures and societies, in particular within the contexts of various religious traditions.

RSC 302 Of Latter-day Saints and Modern-day Prophets: New Religious Movements 3-3-0

In the past two centuries, a number of new religious groups claiming a significant number of adherents have emerged, joining long-established religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in the global religious tapestry. Some of these groups are recognizably offshoots of much older religious traditions while others are entirely new entities, with only a tangential connection to what has gone before. This course will examine the roots and development of some of these groups, which scholars have generally called “New Religious Movements” (NRMs). Possible movements studied will include: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e., Mormonism), Rastafari, Scientology, Bahá’í, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science and QAnon.

RSC 303 / LIB 303 On the Road Again: Pilgrimage in Theory and Practice 3-3-0

This course will examine pilgrimage as embodied experience, with a special focus on contemporary pilgrimage. Cross-cultural approaches and historical context will be key to understanding the current fascination with walking as transformative practice. Theories of identity, community, and belonging will also be discussed. Students will have an opportunity to participate in a short pilgrimage.

RSC 310 Christian Nationalism in America 3-3-0

In the early 20th century, in response to the Enlightenment and growing challenges to literalist biblical claims, a conservative movement emerged among American Protestants. For the next several decades, this movement waxed and waned until it found a standard-bearer, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, in the late 1970s. Falwell fronted an organization called “The Moral Majority” and those supporting it became known as the Religious Right. Today, the Religious Right continues to be a significant part of the American cultural and political landscape, with its viewpoint disseminated by FOX NEWS, among other media. This course will examine the theological underpinnings of the Religious Right; the social, political and religious context in which it emerged and has developed; the effect it has exerted on politics in the United States; and its prospects for the future in a country divided by the “culture wars” that began there in the 1990s.

RSC 332 / CLA 332 Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East 3-3-0

Since the 19th century, magic and divination have been subjects of great scholarly interest. This course will examine how these phenomena were manifested in the region of what is today called the Middle East. We will also look at the supposed polemic against magic and divination in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), where calling someone a magician or diviner was a strategy for social control and definition, serving as an element in the construction of views about legitimate and illegitimate religious authority.

RSC 335 / CLA 335 Sacred Space in the Ancient World 3-3-0

How did the ancients experience their surroundings? How did their conceptions of space and place affect their relationships with their deities, their ancestors, and each other? From lofty temples to humble shrines, scared mountains to grottoes, we will explore the intimate connection between sacred places and the development of ancient identity. Archaeological and literary data, as well as modern theories of space and place, will be examined.

Prerequisites: at least two Classics courses or permission of the instructor

RSC 350 / CLA 350 The Goddess: History, Cult and Myth 3-3-0

From Diana’s bow to Athena’s shield, from the fearsome wail of the Erinyes to the dulcet tones of the Muses, the sacred feminine in all its manifestations has fueled the imagination. How we in the modern world perceive the female divine, however, also reflects our own changing attitudes towards women. In this seminar course, we will examine the sacred feminine in art, archaeology, and literature, from Paleolithic Europe to contemporary America, with a view to understanding the construction of tropes of femininity both in ancient cultures and our own. Topics may include Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman goddesses, Hindu goddesses, gendered archaeology, the virgin Mary, modern goddess movements, and more!

Prerequisite: at least two Classics courses or permission of the instructor

Independent Studies

RSC 300 Independent Studies I 3-3-0

RSC 301 Independent Studies II 3-3-0

RSC 402F Honours Thesis 6-3-0

A full-year (two-semester) course in which the student does guided research into a subject, produces a written thesis and, ultimately, gives an oral defence of the thesis.

Prerequisite: departmental acceptance of the thesis proposal

Cognate Courses

The following courses in other departments are recognized as Religion, Society and Culture cognates:

- CLA 110** **The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt**
- CLA 113** **Classical Mythology: The Greek Influence on Rome**
- DRA 211** **Ritual and Theatre**
- EDU 313** **Teaching Ethics and Religious Culture
(Elementary & Secondary)**
- HIS 253** **A History of Medieval Europe**
- HIS 279** **The Middle East in the Twentieth Century**
- HIS 291** **Women in the Islamic World**
- HIS 393** **Inquisitions, Law and Society**
- LIB 384** **Dante's Divine Comedy**
Some courses offered in the College of Liberal Arts
Some courses offered in the Philosophy Department
- PSY 298** **Zen and the Brain**

This is not an exhaustive list. Religion, Society and Culture students should consult the chair of the Department regarding any other courses offered by other departments or programs that they wish to take for Religion, Society and Culture credit.
