Religious Studies

The concentration in Religious Studies cultivates understanding of societies and cultures throughout the world by exploring religious thought and practice in various historical, geographic, and political contexts. Concentrators discover new ways of engaging the complex world in which they live by studying the public and private concerns that the study of religion highlights, including understandings of self, community, good, evil, authority, and inequality. Equipped with interdisciplinary skills of interpretation and analysis, students learn how political affairs, institutions, conflicts, and social spheres commonly recognized as secular have taken shape through the formation and transmission of religious beliefs, behaviors, values, and rituals. These skills include: close analysis of texts, images, artifacts, artistic works, and other social data; synthesis of research through written and verbal expression; interpretation of the past and present through multiple forms of evidence; and engagement with contemporary social issues and communities.

1. Basic Requirement

A concentration in Religious Studies includes a minimum of nine semester-long courses. Those nine courses include RELS 1000 (a seminar in theories and methods in the study of religion), RELS 1995 (the senior capstone seminar) and seven other concentration courses, which must satisfy the concentration's distribution requirements. Students who transfer to Brown or study abroad must complete at least five courses in Religious Studies at Brown.

2. Distribution of Introductory, Intermediate, and Advanced courses:

Among the seven concentration courses, no more than four courses can be at the introductory level (0001-0199). The plan of study must include at least two advanced-level courses (above 1000), in addition to RELS 1000 and RELS 1995.

3. Distribution of Focus and Approach:

Concentrators are encouraged to develop a broad understanding of religious activity as well as a deep understanding of particular forms of religion. A concentrator's course plan should include courses that examine a variety of geographic and cultural contexts, through a variety of approaches. The seven concentration courses (that is, the courses other than RELS 1000 and RELS 1995) must:

1. examine more than one religious tradition or culture;
2. reflect more than one primary approach to the study of religion (e.g., philosophical, historical, textual)
3. include at least one course designated as examining Race, Power, and Privilege (RPP). The RPP curricular program highlights courses that examine issues such as structural inequality, racial formations, disparities of power, and autocritique of academic disciplines. In addition to RELS 1000, many Religious Studies courses bear this designation.

To help students create a program of study that balances breadth of focus and approach with attention to the concentrator's particular interests and objectives, concentrators will meet with the Director of Undergraduate Studies (or an approved advisor from within the department) when declaring the concentration to discuss their intellectual priorities and provisional course plans. (In the concentration declaration form, concentrators will describe their priorities and plans.) Through these initial discussions as well as advising meetings in subsequent semesters, concentrators and their advisors will work together to recognize and cultivate each concentrator's theoretical, interpretive, or thematic interests.

4. Courses in Other Departments

Courses cross-listed from other departments and courses listed in other departments but taught by Religious Studies faculty count toward the program of study. Up to two courses taught by faculty in other departments also can count toward the program (pending approval by the DUS) if relevant to the student's program of study. Students who transfer to Brown, study abroad, or otherwise petition to include Brown courses not cross-listed with Religious Studies must complete at least five courses in Religious Studies at Brown.

5. Capstone Project

In the final year of study, all concentrators enroll in the department's Senior Capstone Seminar. Concentrators undertake a capstone project that builds upon a student's previous work in the department and provides a culminating focus for a student's concentration. In extenuating circumstances, a student may petition the DUS to fulfill the capstone within an existing course (subject to approval by its instructor) or an independent study; a concentrator must still enroll in at least nine courses total. Concentrators also may satisfy the capstone requirement by undertaking an honors thesis. Whichever context concentrators choose to complete their capstone within, they will develop a plan for their project no later than the end of the spring semester of the junior year, in consultation with the Director of Undergraduate Studies and other faculty as appropriate.

Honors Thesis (Optional)

A thesis is an opportunity for students to conduct extended independent research under the guidance of faculty. If a student chooses to write an honors thesis, in addition to completing the typical seven concentration courses (in addition to RELS 1000) the student will enroll in RELS 1995 during Fall and RELS 1999 during Spring semester of the senior year. Whether or not a student receives honors, RELS 1995 will serve as the student's capstone course. To be eligible to write a thesis, a student must have earned a grade point average of greater than 3.5 (A=4, B=3, C=2) on courses that count toward the concentration. Additionally, to be eligible for honors, concentrators may take no more than two of the concentration courses with the "S/NC" option, after declaring a Religious Studies concentration. (Note: if a student is philosophically committed to taking the majority of her or his courses at Brown as "S/NC," that student may petition the Department to waive this "S/NC" limit.) Writing the thesis is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for receiving Honors. In order to receive Honors, the student's thesis must earn an A from its two readers, and the student must have earned a grade point average of greater than 3.5 in the concentration and satisfied all other concentration requirements.

Jason Protass, Director of Undergraduate Studies
Tina Creamer, Departmental Administrator