Religious Studies, M.A.

Graduate study in the department addresses the idea of religion and the ways in which religious traditions originate, develop, and interact over time. Students learn to identify and use multiple methods for the study of religion, including historical, philosophical, ethical, literary, linguistic, psychological, ethnographic, and digital approaches.

Graduate study is flexible. Students create individualized programs of study in consultation with their advisors and core committee members, in light of faculty expertise within the department and around the University. Programs often are developed in relation to one of the following four areas of concentration:

- religions in the Middle East, Ancient Near East, and Mediterranean;
- religions in Asia;
- religions in the Americas and Europe; or
- religion, ethics, and society.

Programs also are developed across these areas or thematically in relation to the department’s central focus which is religion and public life, most notably religion’s impact on the construction of individual and group identities and the dynamics of social change. Included in this focus is religion’s relationship to gender, race, ethnicity, and other markers of identity, and the practice and study of religion in a digital age.

For more information about graduate study and the faculty, see Graduate Program and People on the department’s website.

Requirements

The Master of Arts program in religious studies requires a minimum of 30 s.h. of graduate credit and is offered with or without thesis. Students must complete 24 s.h. of the credit required for the degree at the University of Iowa and must maintain a cumulative g.p.a. of at least 3.20.

The program is designed for students who wish to advance their understanding of a particular area of religious studies or explore a variety of traditions and topics. It also is intended to prepare students to educate the public about religion and its influences, within a variety of life and career contexts.

Requirements for languages and other research tools vary according to the student’s study focus. Students are supervised by a three-person committee consisting of an advisor and two additional faculty members.

All students complete the following five courses.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RELS:5100</td>
<td>Teaching and Public Engagement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELS:5200</td>
<td>Varieties of Religion in the Contemporary World</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELS:5300</td>
<td>Genealogies of Religion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELS:5400</td>
<td>Methods and Theories in the Study of Religion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One graduate seminar</td>
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Students select remaining course work depending on their interest area and in consultation with their core committee. In their M.A. thesis work, students demonstrate and refine their research and writing skills. They may count a maximum of 6 s.h. of thesis credit toward the degree. Students must defend their thesis. Those who choose not to write a thesis must pass an examination that tests their competence in completed course work.

Admission

Applicants must meet the admission requirements of the Graduate College; see the Manual of Rules and Regulations of the Graduate College on the Graduate College website.

Applicants to the M.A. program ordinarily must have a verbal reasoning score of at least 153 and a quantitative reasoning score of at least 147 on the revised Graduate Record Examination (GRE) General Test (verbal reasoning score of at least 500 and quantitative reasoning score of at least 580 on the old GRE General Test) and a g.p.a. of at least 3.00.

Application materials must include an application form; a transcript of all undergraduate and graduate work (one copy must be sent to the University’s Office of Admissions and a second copy must be sent to the Department of Religious Studies); an application or waiver of consideration form for graduate assistantships; three confidential letters of recommendation; and a writing sample that demonstrates the applicant’s ability to engage in critical analysis. Applicants also must submit a brief personal essay that explains their objectives for graduate study and states which area of graduate study in religion will suit their objectives best. Students may indicate one of the four areas of concentration below or an area that crosses the concentrations and is well supported by faculty expertise. For details, see Graduate Admission, Financial Aid, and Additional Funding on the department’s website.

Areas of concentration include:

- religions in the Middle East, Ancient Near East, and Mediterranean;
- religions in Asia;
- religions in the Americas and Europe; and
- religion, ethics, and society.

All application materials must be received by January 15 to receive full consideration for fall admission.

Career Advancement

Graduate students in religious studies acquire a wide range of competencies that are useful for almost any career they pursue. Students gain research skills; they master the craft of writing; they learn to plan, manage, and complete large projects; they gain teaching skills that are useful both inside and outside the academy; they learn to argue a point persuasively; they gain the ability to communicate with others about controversial issues; they learn how to understand and mediate differences in religious perspectives and values; they acquire highly valued language skills; and they gain expertise in the use of digital technologies for research and teaching.

Graduate study in religion can prepare a student to become a professor of religious studies. It also can provide the ability to integrate a deep and theoretically sophisticated understanding of religion and its influences into other
professions, such as medicine, nursing, law, political leadership, policy making, journalism, or counseling.

Students who earn a M.A. often gain admission to excellent Ph.D. programs in religious studies and in other areas of study, such as journalism and mass communication. Others have gone on to divinity school, law school, and into careers within media and communication, church leadership, government, and public service.